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“WE GET HIT BY AN AVALANCHE OF EXCITING NEW PC GAMES”



PHIL SAVAGE

Specialist in Hackers

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This month

Wrote this bio before flying out to E3. If you're holding the magazine, it probably went OK.

You never know exactly what you're going to get from one E3 to the next. Some years it's all about the consoles and their incredibly polished, massively expensive first-party offerings. Other years – 2019 is one of them – we get hit by an avalanche of exciting new PC games.

Let's run down the list.

There's *Cyberpunk 2077*, CD

Projekt Red's impressive new RPG. There's *Baldur's Gate III*, the surprise next game from *Divinity: Original Sin 2* developer Larian Studios. And there's *Doom Eternal*, id's clever continuation of everything that made 2016's *Doom* reboot one of the best shooters of recent years. It's a great year to be a PC gamer.

Phil Savage

PHIL SAVAGE
EDITOR

phil.savage@futurenet.com

TALK TO PC GAMER
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The PC Gamer team



FRASER BROWN

Specialist in Akira

Twitter @FraserIBrown

This month

Learned about the existence of *Baldur's Gate III* at a barbecue. This isn't even a joke.



CHRIS LIVINGSTON

Specialist in Total Recall

Twitter @screencuisine

This month

Stepped onto the battlefield of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* with nothing but a notepad.



ANDY KELLY

Specialist in Blade Runner

Twitter @ultrabrilliant

This month

Spent a portion of the issue on holiday in Ireland. Still found time to review a space game.



MALINDY HETFELD

Specialist in Appleseed

Twitter @yourkyotowife

This month

Launched an investigation into one of the most pervasive E3 staples: videogame trailers.

Contents

#333
AUGUST 2019

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Monitor

08 THE TOP STORY

The PC Gaming Show returns.

10 THE SPY

Could *Death Stranding* come to PC?

12 SPECIAL REPORT

What makes a good trailer?

14 INSIDE

DEVELOPMENT

The human cost of layoffs.

Previews

18 World of Warcraft Classic

24 Baldur's Gate III

28 Planet Zoo

30 Call of Duty: Modern Warfare

34 Doom Eternal

36 Wolfenstein: Youngblood

38 Knights & Bikes

40 Journey to the Savage Planet

42 Night Call

44 Runescape

Features

46 Cyberpunk 2077

What's new with CDPR's RPG?

54 Knights of the Old Republic

The making of a Star Wars classic.



18 WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Fraser explains why *World of Warcraft Classic* is more than just a nostalgia trip.

46 CYBERPUNK 2077

Phil uncovers fresh details about CD Projekt Red's highly anticipated RPG.

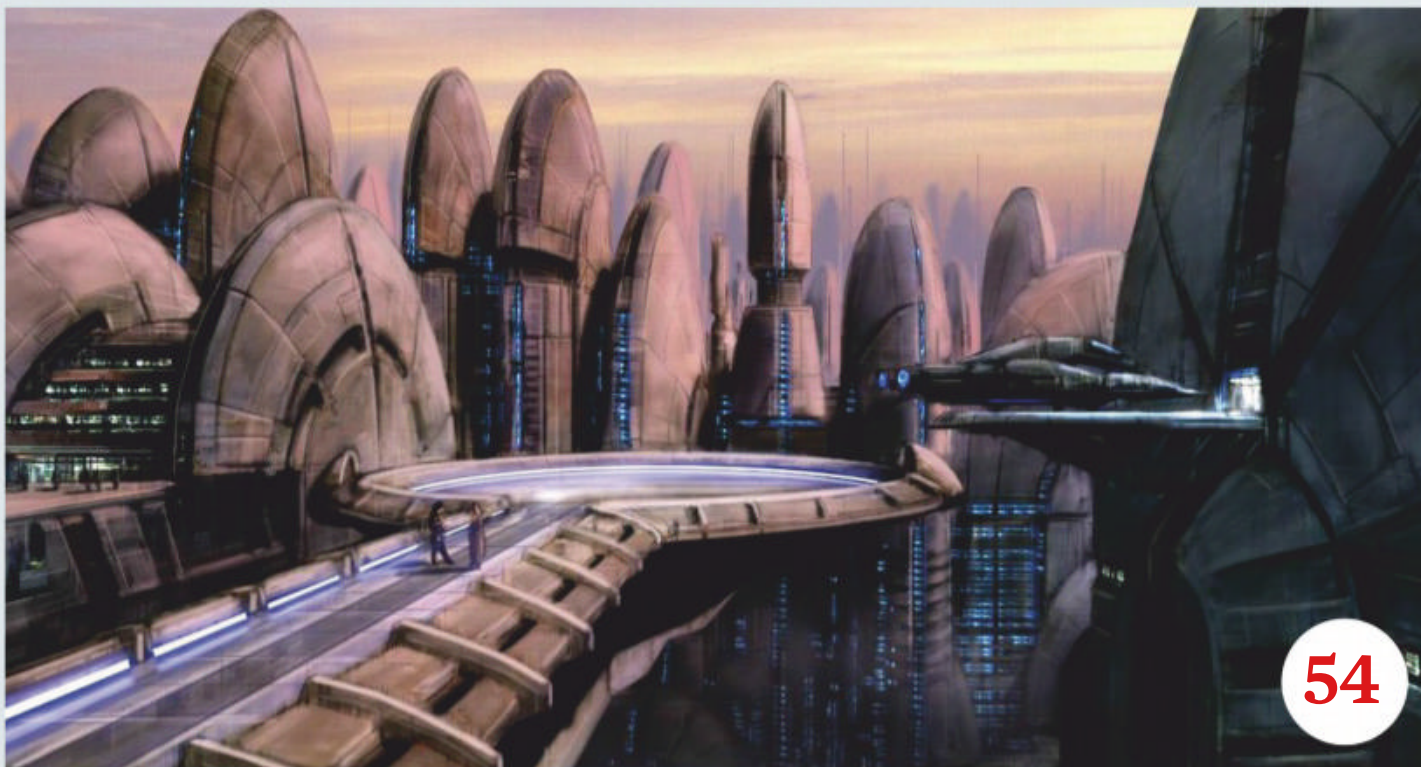
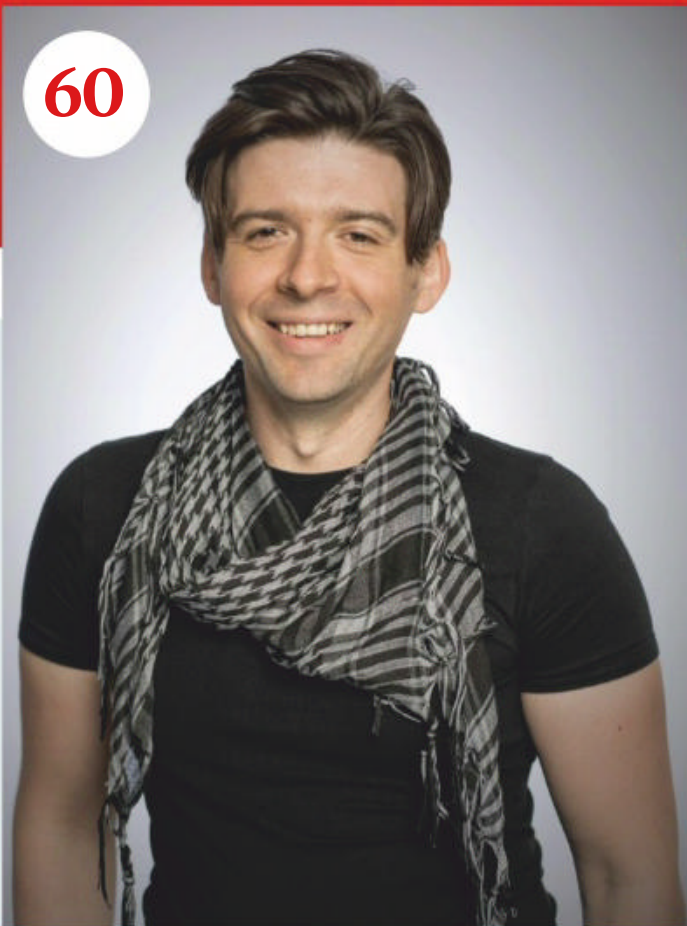
54 KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

How BioWare stayed true to the "used universe" philosophy of Star Wars design.



18

60



54



98



102

60 THREE KINGDOMS

Lead designer Leif Walter on *Total War: Three Kingdoms* and the future of the series.

98 CONTROLLERS RATED

Need a break from your keyboard? Here are our picks of the best controllers you can buy.

102 OCULUS RIFT S REVIEWED

The next generation of Oculus Rift has arrived. But is it worth your time or money?

Reviews

- 70 Observation
- 74 Octopath Traveler
- 76 Outer Wilds
- 80 Pathologic 2
- 82 A Plague Tale: Innocence
- 84 Mordhau
- 88 Void Bastards
- 90 Warhammer: Chaosbane

FREE GAMES

- 92 SPEK.TAKL
- 93 The Interlude
- 93 File://maniac

THEY'RE BACK

- 94 Total War: Warhammer 2
- 95 Crypt of the Necrodancer
- 95 Chaos Reborn
- 95 Crawl
- 95 Kingdoms of Amalur: The Reckoning

Hardware

98 GROUP TEST

The best gamepads for PC.

102 REVIEW

The next gen of VR is here.

104 TECHREPORT

Why is hitting 144fps so hard?

106 BUYER'S GUIDE

The best parts for your PC.

Extra Life

110 NOW PLAYING

It's time to reinstall *Deus Ex*.

114 UPDATE

Minecraft's villagers get an upgrade.

116 BEGINNER'S GUIDE

How to get started with sims.

118 DIARY

Pursuing combat in *Mirror's Edge*.

122 REINSTALL

Westwood's forgotten RTS.

126 WHY I LOVE

Scanning planets in *Mass Effect 2*.

128 MUST PLAY

Andy's favourite PC games.

MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



Our hosts welcome the crowd to E3's only PC-dedicated show.

THE PC GAMING SHOW

All the big reveals from our annual **E3 SHOW**

PC Gamer returned to Los Angeles for the annual PC Gaming Show on June 10, which is still the only major E3 event completely dedicated to PC gaming. Held at the beautiful Mayan Theater, it featured almost two hours of interviews, trailers, gameplay footage, and exclusive reveals.

Rebellion showed off the first trailer for *Evil Genius 2*, a sequel to the cult strategy sim which lets you become a Bond-style supervillain. We also served up the first in-game footage of *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*, a sequel to the vampire RPG.

Chucklefish revealed its space colony management game, *Starmaner*, and Tripwire Interactive unleashed the first ever trailer for the brutal-looking medieval brawler *Chivalry 2*, which includes castle sieges and large battles. Klei, the studio behind *Don't Starve*, revealed more about

its next game, *Griftlands*. This sci-fi strategy game features card-based combat and some really impressive animation. Our stage was also blessed with the presence of a legend when Yu Suzuki, creator of Sega classics including *Virtua Fighter*, revealed a new *Shenmue III* trailer.

SO. MANY. GAMES.

Other reveals included *Midnight Ghost Hunt*, which creator Sam Malone described as a “multiplayer ghost hunting hide-and-seek game.” Funcom showed off its cartoony take on Conan the Barbarian called *Conan Chop Chop*. And Frontier talked about its next big game, *Planet Zoo*.

Fans of frantic Warhammer shooter *Vermintide 2* were well catered for at the show too with the reveal of Versus, a brand new PvP mode. “Each game includes one round of playing as the enemies and one playing as the heroes,” said Fatshark CEO Martin Wahlund.

And that's just a small sample of what the show had to offer. To watch the whole thing, head to the **PC Gamer** YouTube channel. Here you'll also find trailers for all the games featured. And thanks to everyone involved, including our excellent hosts Sean ‘Day[9]’ Plott and Frankie Ward, for making it all happen.
Andy Kelly

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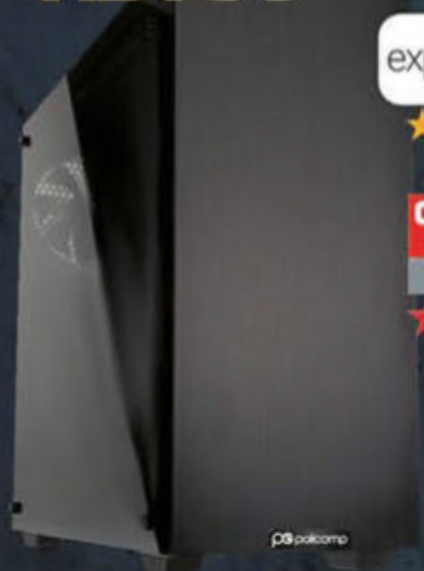
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The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Hideo Kojima is someone who revels in secrecy just as much as The Spy does. After leaving Konami back in 2015 and founding his own company, Kojima Productions, he sailed down from the rafters to unveil *Death Stranding* as a PS4 exclusive at E3 2016, before once again disappearing in a cloud of smoke. The perfect heist for the attention of millions.

While Kojima went back to work on his game in peace, and people analysed every scrap of information from the trailer's throat baby to photos of his breakfast on Twitter, the years passed and we learned to appreciate the fluidity of the word 'exclusive'. Part of it is the Japanese gaming industry's rediscovery of PC gaming, resulting in PC releases of games The Spy never previously thought would ever see the light on Steam – and as ports that are in an actually playable state, too! Games previously assumed to have been PlayStation exclusives in fact never were, such as *Nier: Automata*, which was initially published by Sony before reaching a certain age and moving out. Then there are those pesky former exclusives, like *Journey* and *Detroit: Become Human*, a result of Epic swooping in and offering developers money to sell their games on the Epic Games Store.



THE SPY
The Spy's carbon footprint is nonexistent. The Spy's silicon footprint is massive.

You and The Spy both heard the words 'PS4 exclusive' back in 2016, dear reader, but minds are there to be expanded. Now The Spy can speculate about *Death Stranding* coming to PC. Even prior to 2016, The Spy caught rumblings in the form of a hastily-deleted Q&A detailing the cooperation between Kojima Productions and Sony, which mentions that a then-unnamed title would come to PC after a period of PS4 exclusivity. Furthermore, unlike other PS4-exclusive titles, *Death Stranding* hasn't been touted as such in Sony's marketing materials, including recent pre-orders.

At this point The Spy notes, not entirely unimpressed by Kojima's skill at subterfuge, that not a whole lot of touting has happened over the years in general, simply because Kojima revels in speculation and this, much like the trailers, is just another way of keeping the conversation surrounding the game alive.

STRANDED BUT NOT DEAD

Recently, Italian journalist Antonio Fucito discovered his calling as part-time oracle and apparently divined *Death Stranding*'s release date as November 8. He then took to testing out his newfound powers further by speculating during a Twitch live stream that *Death Stranding* would be a PlayStation exclusive for a period of six to 12 months. In The Spy's world, no trusted outside agent blabs twice and lives, and as such, a basis for this rumour has yet to emerge. Things look... well, a bit stranded.

Currently, the Decima engine is the most likely indicator of *Death Stranding*'s Sony exclusivity. Developed by Sony-owned studio Guerrilla Games, Kojima received it as a present during a 2015 studio visit, "before even signing an NDA or anything", as he recalled during PlayStation Experience 2016. The gift of an engine came in a wooden box, like a cursed jewel of binding, but that isn't to say Kojima signed the chances of a PC version away with a tech deal. The Spy guesses that to know what went on behind closed doors that day you would have to be a spy, but The Spy really can't be everywhere at once. Spy out. ■

The Spy

PART OF IT IS THE JAPANESE GAMING INDUSTRY'S REDISCOVERY OF PC GAMING

This month in... 2009



1 Here's a secret: we want you to buy our magazine. And sometimes that desire leads to, let's say, some enthusiastic cover hits. So when we claimed that *Star Wars: The Old Republic* was "The Warcraft killer", it was simply an optimistic guess. In our defence, 1) *Star Wars: The Old Republic* was an incredibly exciting prospect, and 2) holy crap, look at that cover art!

ISSUE
203, August 2009
ON THE COVER
Star Wars: The Old Republic
IN THE CHARTS
Bulletproof – La Roux

2 Indie games! After the release of *Braid*, *Audiosurf*, *World of Goo* and more in 2008, Alec Meer meets the "maverick heroes" of PC gaming.



3 Tom Francis takes a deep dive into *Deus Ex*'s first level. This is a classic PC Gamer feature, running down the many, many paths through Liberty Island, and using them to explain why *Deus Ex* is so damn good. Not to spoil anything about next month's feature section, but if you're a fan of *Deus Ex*'s first mission, keep an eye out for issue 334.



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



The trailer captures the calm atmosphere of *Where the Goats Are*.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Trailers find many different ways to show off a game in the best light

Everyone watches trailers, whether as part of a big industry showcase such as E3, on YouTube, or on a Steam store page. To generate interest, trailers need to simultaneously capture your attention and efficiently deliver essential information about plot. The exact method differs a lot depending on the game's genre and its unique selling points, but the basic aims are the same. I spoke to developers and a marketing team to find out what a good trailer needs.

"Game trailers are often not clear enough about what you end up doing. Is it a narrative game without a fail state? Is it a survival game? All this really basic information is missing, but it's really important in games because of the great variety of experiences games offer," says Game Designer (and former **PC Gamer** Section Editor) Tom Francis. "Often when you're making a game you don't realise what it is you haven't said about your game." The trailer for his game *Heat Signature* features footage which is explained via a humorous voiceover. As a result, viewers get a sense of how it plays and the tone it's going for.

Phi Dinh and his team at Phigames took a different approach with the trailer for action platformer *Recompile*. Instead of footage or a storyboard, they took a piece of music as a starting point. "I'm keeping things intentionally

vague that way rather than allotting explicit time frames to show off game mechanics or combat," says Dinh. "It's quicker than asking a composer to make the music fit your very specific vision."

Phigames also recognised *Recompile*'s strong visual identity as one of its selling points – with a player character that immediately stands out, and a unique environment inside a computer mainframe. The resulting trailer uses the sparse opening bars to establish the scene and introduce the running player. As the music becomes more complex and more intense, the trailer brings in footage of increasingly varied and violent actions, building from simple jumps to laser fire and explosions.

One function of a trailer is to offer a vital first impression. That means developers and publishers often need to figure out how to show the game in its best light while it's still under development. "Indie teams tend to polish mechanics and environments right from the beginning of the development cycle," says Dinh. "For *Recompile* we prototyped all of our mechanics from the beginning in order to build an extremely polished first level we could then use to make the trailer." Tom Francis, however, prefers to present you with a single polished trailer once the game is complete and ready for purchase. Before the game's release he's already captured himself playing it and shared raw footage via social media, so the



Creation

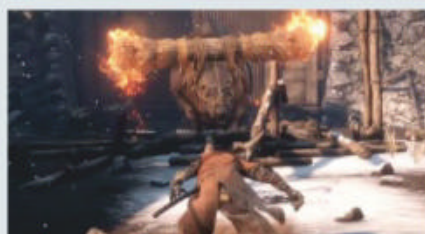
Trailers are a vital marketing tool, and the first impression players get of a game in action. Game trailers are subject to a number of considerations that differ greatly from films, and even from game to game. What form a trailer takes can depend on the game's genre, the state of its production process, where the audience is most likely to see the trailer and more.



FAR LEFT: Images alone are not enough to explain how *Heat Signature* functions.

LEFT: *Recompile*'s player character and environment make it instantly recognisable.

A CASE STUDY *What makes the trailer for Sekiro so engaging?*



THE COLD OPEN

The trailer immediately opens on the action using a variety of camera angles.



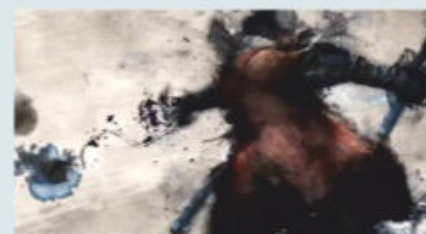
THE DRAMATIC CURVE

Action is followed by this shot that leads to a description of the plot.



MANY ENEMIES

A montage full of quick cuts shows you many different bosses in action.



INTERESTING TRANSITIONS

To not fade to black too often, the trailer uses watercolour-inspired transitions.

trailer acts as more of an official statement. Marla Fitzsimmons, marketing manager at publisher Fellow Traveller, notes that, "Just as the creative approach to the trailer differs from game to game, when we release the trailer also depends on the state a game is in." Announcement opportunities like E3 introduce further complications, meaning a team might need to use footage that's more raw or from a purpose-built level instead of the game per-se to meet the deadline.

While some studios prefer (or can only afford) a single trailer, others use a multiple trailer approach. A series of trailers over time can help maintain interest in a project, or allow the developers to show elements of the game off in more depth. A publisher may also have the budget to commission several trailers that focus on different aspects and thus appeal to different potential player bases. "With indie games one trailer is often enough to summarise what's compelling about a game," Fellow Traveller's Managing Director Chris Wright says, which is reassuring news for those who don't have the content or budget for more.

SHOWING AND TELLING

Fellow Traveller commissions editors such as Derek Lieu to make their trailers. Editors can request custom game builds from developers to help with the process, allowing for different camera angles, letting them switch from day to night instantly, letting them zoom in on the action and so on. Lieu used one such build to let him showcase

particular interactions in his trailer for *Where the Goats Are*, a narrative game by Lambic Studios. Not all games are easily showcased, though. "For a platformer or an FPS you can easily show what the gameplay looks like," says Wright. Text-heavy games are harder to show and less interesting to watch so you need to go beyond game footage. "We may use voiceover to substitute text or focus on the overarching plot," adds Wright.

After all the work that goes into a trailer, it has worryingly little time to make an impression on its audience. On his blog Derek Lieu warns against logos at the beginning, since a viewer's attention wanes after as little as five seconds. Yet the time it may take to portray a game through its trailer once again varies. An indie game reveal might have a one minute trailer, a big budget title may stretch into the five minute range.

Ultimately the point is not to reach an arbitrary timestamp, it's to interest you in the project and then deliver key information such as a release date or a call to action like "Wishlist on Steam now".

Fitzsimmons summarises why the trailer is the most important game marketing asset. "The job of a trailer is to communicate a pitch, which for us is often no more than a single sentence – a specific feeling we want to convey, or the thing that makes a game unique," she says. Francis agrees, "After I've put my best foot forward and showed you what it is we have to offer all that's left for me to ask is 'Do you want it?'" ■

Malindy Hetfeld

A VIEWER'S ATTENTION WANES AFTER AS LITTLE AS FIVE SECONDS

Inside Dev

MAKING GAMES IS HARD

LAI D OFF

The people behind the numbers. *By Xalavier Nelson Jr.*

It's easy to see game layoffs as a tragic but disconnected event. 150 people lost their jobs, but that's easy to reduce to simple numbers. What does it *mean*? For many developers, it can be anything from the confusing loss of a dream job, to the sudden absence of treasured friends and colleagues. According to one person who requested anonymity – I'll call him Jason – it meant a \$25 Amazon gift card.

"In 2013," Jason begins, "I got a job at one of the three largest third-party game publishers as a PR employee. It was my first real job in the games industry – a dream job to me. I was immediately blinded by how 'honoured' I should be to work for said brand. So much so that I didn't notice obvious problems from the outset. About five months in I was already burnt out. The hours and the pressure to perform got to me and my manager could not deal with the emotions involved with that level of stress. He put every small mistake I made under a microscope and every task was being micromanaged. There was no trust involved. If coverage of a game wasn't positive it was my fault. Period." In the spring of the next year, Jason was escorted into a room, and without warning told that the company "didn't have time" for him. His contract would not be renewed. He was given a \$25 Amazon gift card and pushed out of the building within a half-hour.

This lack of warning isn't atypical. Larz Smith has survived multiple layoffs as lead gameplay programmer at Daybreak, and can attest to the uncertainty that comes with a round of layoffs. "In many cases," says Smith, "I've felt like our studio was doing good!" In fact, after one round of layoffs, Smith found himself planning out a schedule for people right until the day of the next layoffs. Detailing the process, Smith said, "You'll get an impromptu meeting invite to one of two possible meetings: one for the people being

fired and one for everybody else. I've never been in the meeting where people were let go, I can only imagine the anger and panic they feel. In the meeting for people who remain it's just shock and sadness. The meeting is usually

short, enough time to let this group of people know they still have jobs, assure them that this is a necessary evil for the ongoing stability of the company, and in fact to our remaining jobs, and to answer some brief questions."

Developer Dan Jordan found similar processes at work after suffering layoffs at Red 5 of *Firefall*, as well as *Game of Thrones: Ascent* developer Disruptor Beam. Two

separate meetings, and the quiet realisation of which one you occupy. "Both times felt frustrating, demoralising, and humiliating," says Jordan. "For both valid reasons like not having been able to secure a lifeboat and

invalid reasons like not being able to save the studio single-handedly. Difficulty finding jobs at other studios only exacerbated things.

"I still feel bitter and frustrated – with myself, the companies, the circumstances. Maybe devs who go through the wringer enough times get desensitised to it or end up at more stable places. I never got that chance." Jordan is now working outside of the industry.

SURVIVOR'S GUILT

The ramifications of a layoff can be wide-ranging. "Once people have found their motivation again, the effects of a layoff keep popping up," Larz Smith says. "Did you fire somebody in the middle of a big task? We have their PC if the work is on there, but what if they hadn't started on it yet? What if some of the code was left in an in-between state and things aren't quite working? Did they have assets checked out and locked in version control? Do they have any documents on process or pipelines on their machines that haven't been shared or uploaded?" That isn't to mention the guilt cited by many of my sources following a layoff of any size. Gwen Frey, formerly of Irrational Games, addresses the survivorship bias that crops up when we discuss surviving a layoff, "When I go to GDC I run into old co-workers from Irrational all the time, and they are all doing really well and working on exciting new things! However, that is only because the people who never worked in games again don't go to GDC. I honestly don't know who didn't cope with the closure well. I have no idea how many talented people decided that this industry is just too unstable for them."

It's one of several things layoff numbers alone can never address. We can learn that 800 lost their jobs at Activision-Blizzard, but we can't tell how many won't come back. ■

XALAVIER NELSON JR
I'm a full-time game writer and narrative designer, with credits inside and out of gaming.





Tencent (parent company of Riot, Epic, Supercell, etc) laid off around 5,000 of its own employees early this year.



FAR LEFT: Over 250 game developers lost their jobs last year as Telltale began the process of closing its doors.

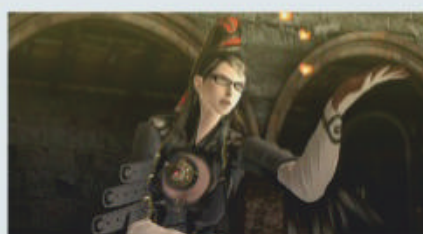
LEFT: Around 800 game developers were laid off by Activision-Blizzard this year, while the company reported "record profits".

ROOTS AND SEEDS *Here are a few prominent developer layoffs and some of the offshoots they spawned*



IRRATIONAL GAMES

The poster child for offshoots, this mass-layoff led to the creation of The Deep End Games (*Perception*), Question Games (*The Blackout Club*), and Chump Squad (*Kine*), among many other talented teams.



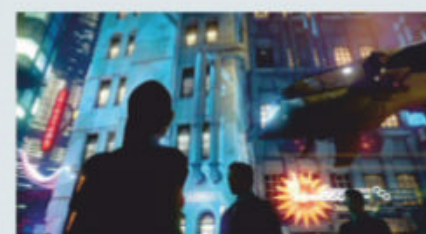
CLOVER STUDIO

After the commercial disappointment of *Viewtiful Joe*, *Okami* and *God Hand*, Clover Studios was dissolved. One of the teams formed in its wake was PlatinumGames, now recognised as one of the best action developers around.



VISCERAL GAMES

The four developers at A Wandering Band met at Visceral Games, and two were directly affected by EA's closure of the studio. The small team now develops *Airborne Kingdom*, a high-flying city management game.



FUNCOM

Funcom has changed sizes several times over its history, with these sometimes wild swings and layoffs leading to the rise of teams including Red Thread Games and indie darling Kitfox Games (*Boyfriend Dungeon*).

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PRE





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 27, 2019

DEVELOPER
Blizzard

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.worldofwarcraft.com

WORLD OF WARCRAFT CLASSIC

More than just a nostalgia trip

Zarwulf, an orc hunter, was the first character I invested any meaningful time with in *World of Warcraft*. But then I moved onto other characters, and when I eventually returned to my old pal, he was gone, at least the one I knew. Warlords of Draenor had arrived, transforming his appearance, while expansions had overhauled the entire class.

Last week, I resurrected Zarwulf when I had the chance to play *World of Warcraft Classic* at the recent Warcraft Summit. The first thing I had to do, of course, was make the pilgrimage to the Crossroads. The walk from Orgrimmar was uneventful, aside from a spot of zhevra hunting. I had a hungry wolf to feed. It was a saunter, accompanied by Barrens chat refusing to leave the old days behind. From there I turned to Ratchet, hung out with pirates, hopped on a ship and visited the Eastern Kingdoms for the first time, again.

World of Warcraft now encompasses multiple worlds and eras, but *Classic* makes Kalimdor and the Eastern Kingdoms feel huge. There's a lot more empty space, long journeys and the absence of modern conveniences. If you want to fly, for instance, you'll need to take public transport along predetermined routes. And where *Battle for Azeroth* flings systems and distractions at you with every step, *Classic* spreads everything out, making it less thrilling but also taking away a lot of pressure.

"It's more focused on these spaces of time where you can think about what your next move is going to be," says lead software engineer Brian Birmingham. "You're engaging in one-on-one combat, and it feels different – more of a relaxed pace. I usually find that as I'm killing one

creature at a time, I'm still thinking about what I'll do after this. There's another quest coming up over here, and I see something off in the distance I want to get, and I see someone patrolling in the background, so I'm always thinking three steps ahead and planning my next move."

I never really noticed how few breaks the modern game offers – but when you're being dragged along or being pulled in 20 different directions, there isn't much time to stop and think, or even just take a pleasant stroll through Stranglethorn Vale during a rainstorm. In *Classic*, it's comfortingly dull.

QUEST KNOWLEDGE

It was during the aforementioned rainstorm that I got lost meandering through ancient ruins. I should be able to draw the world with my eyes closed by now, but I've clearly forgotten a lot about the vanilla version. And there are no handy quest markers to do all the heavy lifting. It's perhaps for the best that quest text unfurls so slowly, as it's the only help you'll get, at least from the game.

Even production director Patrick Dawson, with his vast knowledge of *World of Warcraft*, has forgotten a few things. *Classic* doesn't just recreate what you remember from the 'good old days', it reminds you about all the stuff you've forgotten. "People are going to come for the nostalgia, but they're going to stay for the rediscovery," says Dawson. "That's what's going to hook them."

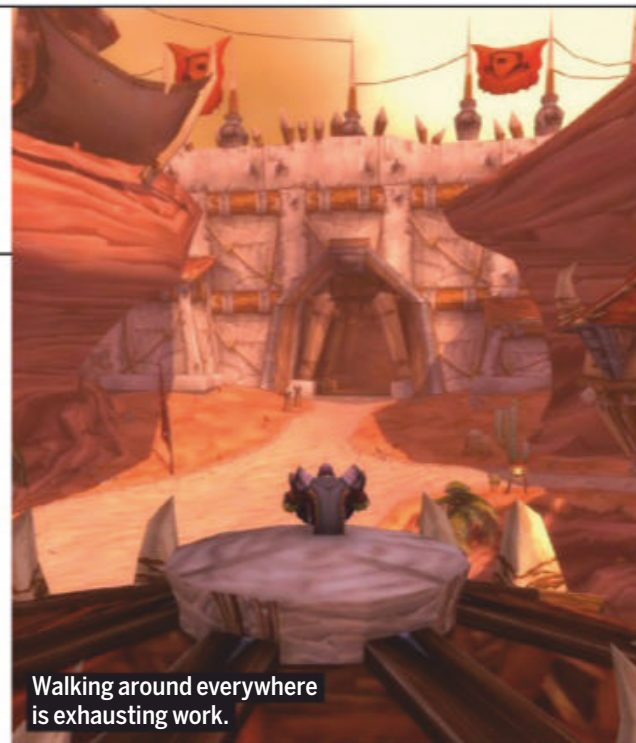
I managed to reorient myself and picked up a few quests, most of them tasking me with murdering raptors. It took all my guile and panicky hotkey smashing to survive. Taking on two or more mobs is hard work, so kill quests take a geological age, and I did start to miss the breezy, done-in-a-flash modern quests. But that's just another reason to find some people and join forces. Lots of *Classic* can be enjoyed solo, but it's clearly not the optimal way to experience the game, and so much of this relaunch is centred

PLAYED IT

"I'M ALWAYS THINKING THREE STEPS AHEAD AND PLANNING MY NEXT MOVE"

PREVIEW

World of Warcraft Classic



Walking around everywhere is exhausting work.



Revisit old raids and get some classic clobber.

around community. Old guilds and players are getting back together, and *Classic* would never have been developed if it wasn't for those players clamouring for it.

Dawson, who used to lead an alliance of two guilds, says he's already had people reach out about playing again, and no conversation about the early days of *World of Warcraft* is complete without talking about the surprising friendships that sprung out of it. That tighter sense of community, even after it started to attract millions of players, was in large part thanks to finding groups for dungeons.

"The group forming experience was sort of organic," he says. "LF 1 more Stratholme, right? So once you've found that person and they did well and you started talking to each other there, you want to do it again. I remember recruiting so many people into my guild just by doing that, just by running dungeons and inviting them to our raids."

Before long, a group got together for a PvP brawl, trekking from all over the world for a spot of bloodletting after they settled on a place they all remembered. They chatted in-game and shouted across the hall, getting the logistics out of the way so they could get to the fighting. There might not be pet battles, rotating world quests or a dizzying array of dungeons and dungeon types, but *Classic* will still offer up plenty of things to do between wandering around murdering surprisingly tough animals, as long as people are looking for groups and fights.

"I think there will be a lot of people who come in and see it as an alternative or a tourism thing, who want to see what *Classic* is like, but what we're planning for is the people who'll stick around," says Dawson. "Three weeks, four weeks after launch, they're in there, they're getting ready for Molten Core, they're gearing up for raids, they're going to start doing world bosses when that content unlocks, and that's what we're looking to make sure we have a realm population to support. There are a lot of people who are super interested in that experience and we're committed to deliver it."

Players are going to reach the point where they're ready to raid at different times, so Blizzard's spacing out the

cadence of updates. *Classic* will go from 1.12 to the arrival of Naxxramas and the Scourge Invasion two patches at a time, largely following the original order, though with a few exceptions.

"It's intended to unlock the raid progression content primarily, and also the battleground content," Birmingham explains. "We wanted to make sure that the power progression didn't jump immediately to the end. We wanted people to feel like there was a sense of progression for each of the raid tiers."

By spreading it out, there will be time for players to find guilds, forge (or reforge) some friendships and encase themselves in the best gear before marching into Onyxia's Lair or the other original raids. But mucking around in the jungle with my level 40 orc, preparing for the endgame seemed like a distant challenge. I was still at the odd jobs part of my heroic journey and trying to figure out a barely recognisable class.

As I ran away from one raptor too many, it dawned on me that I should probably check out all the stuff crammed into my hotbars. Remember when you had lots of different tracking abilities that could only be activated one at a time? They're back! It's inconvenient and means you have lots of ultra-specific, mostly useless abilities, but there's something reassuring about how staunchly Blizzard is sticking to the way things were, and there are some benefits that come along with the little frustrations.

POINTED DECISIONS

Building your hunter or mage or whatever you pick is considerably more involved than the modern version makes it, and messier, but it's liberating. With every point put into your talents, you might be making a terrible mistake, but that's a little bit exciting. It's all small, incremental improvements, but you're constantly being given decisions about your build and new points to put into it. And there are so many points! And paths! With all the streamlining and class transformations, much of it welcome, *World of Warcraft* has lost some of its traditional RPG chops.

Even unintended stuff has made its way back in, like spell batching. Because of the way the old servers processed player actions in batches, it allowed players to polymorph each other at the same time even if in reality there was a short delay. You'll be able to do simultaneous polymorphing to your heart's content in *Classic*, but it had some

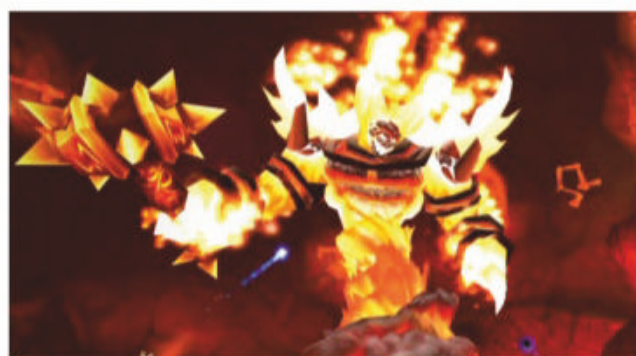
WITH EVERY POINT PUT INTO YOUR TALENTS, YOU MIGHT BE MAKING A TERRIBLE MISTAKE



PREVIEW

World of Warcraft Classic

It's aged a lot better than I have.



Off to the jungle to hunt 1,000 raptors.

My wolf is sad because I keep forgetting to give him snacks.



World of Warcraft Classic



➤ unusual consequences when it was reintroduced. “People asked for it, so we put it back in, and because of some additional changes we’d added to the code over the years, it actually introduced about a second and a half of loot lag,” Birmingham says. “It didn’t occur to us that the two things could be related. When we saw we were experiencing it, we didn’t know where it was coming from, but tracked it down, we found it and we removed it again. Sometimes these systems are complicated, interrelated, and you go to fix one thing and it causes a different issue.”

Meanwhile, other things that have been working as designed have been misidentified as bugs. Birmingham recalls noticing an issue with the Charge ability in an early build where it stunned the enemy instead of putting them into combat with the player, and only once the player had arrived at the enemy and auto-attacked would it retaliate. He assumed it was a bug, but comparing it to the original 1.12 behaviour, that was how it was meant to work.

That data is one of the things Blizzard has over private vanilla servers, at least one of which plans to continue after *Classic* launches. “I think we have a better promise of stability, and also a better promise of authenticity,” Birmingham tells me. “We actually have the original data, so we can go back and look at what it was actually like.”

“We’re not trying to do it just based on memories, which can be flawed. That can be a starting point, to give you that sense of ‘I remember this, I feel this, it feels right to me,’ but when you get down to the nitty-gritty details, sometimes you think it was one way, but when you go and look it’s actually different.”

Nostalgia and our selective memories also make it easier to gloss over a game’s shortcomings, but there’s one place where rose-tinted glasses aren’t necessary. *Classic* has an abundance of style and character, and I was surprised to find that even with the newer textures, character models and graphics options stripped out, the world remains lavish, eye-catching and completely resistant to the passage of time. It’s an aesthetic

inextricably linked to the MMO, but really it started in *Warcraft*.

“We do have a *Warcraft* style, and that’s largely things are over-proportioned and colours are bright and vibrant,” Senior Art Director Samwise Didier says. “A lot of times people just say ‘Well, yeah that’s how games are done’, but there wasn’t a lot of that before. *Lord of the Rings* and all the traditional medieval fantasy stuff was a bit dingy, not bright and colourful, so we sort of took that comic book colouring style from comics like *Thor* and all these vibrant, over the top, heroic things and applied it to our game.”

The big shoulders, for instance, which feel so very *World of Warcraft*, were initially handy in the RTS because it made soldiers easy to identify. Now they make it easy to identify fashion criminals. The world and style development over the course of multiple games meant it was already refined by the time *World of Warcraft* launched, so just like players returning to *Classic*, Azeroth’s first denizens were already familiar with it.

“I think *Warcraft*, with a lot of its iterations, the art got better, the stories got deeper, the technology improved and the designers got better,” Didier says. “So you had ten years of *Warcraft* before *World of Warcraft* even came out. And as soon as it came out and people started at level one, they knew exactly what was going on.”

PLAYER BASE

I got lost, chased by raptors, lost again in my talent trees and achieved very little, but it was a great way to waste a day. The pace and trickier one-on-one duels feel like a palate cleanser now that *Battle for Azeroth* lets you blow through a vast chunk of the game like an invincible demigod. But spread out across months or years? I’m not sure I have the patience for it. *Classic* is a seductive prospect, but I suspect I’ll just be one of the tourists.

World of Warcraft Classic will begin – all you need is a subscription to the regular game – on August 27, with a closed beta kicking off on May 15. Blizzard hasn’t announced dates for the patches, nor what happens after the Scourge invasion. A lot of that will be down to the players, and right now there are no plans beyond the final vanilla update. It will exist as a snapshot of the game as it used to be. If you want it to move forward, maybe to *Wrath of the Lich King*, the greatest expansion of the lot, let Blizzard know.

Fraser Brown



LF boat friends.

“WE’RE NOT TRYING TO DO IT JUST BASED ON MEMORIES, WHICH CAN BE FLAWED”

PREVIEW

Baldur's Gate III

Meet the hideous new face of *Baldur's Gate*.



The city is just one of the game's locations.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Larian Studios

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.baldursgate3.game

BALDUR'S GATE III

Larian combines the best of *Divinity* with D&D 5th edition

Divinity: Original Sin 2 developer Larian Studios is working on its follow up to one of the best RPGs on PC – a third adventure with a new party of heroes. Just what you'd expect from *Baldur's Gate III*. Cue fainting elves and gasping halflings. Eighteen years after the Bhaalspawn saga came to a close, we're finally returning to the Forgotten Realms.

The world's moved forward quite a bit since the last games, so instead of picking up where its predecessors left things, *Baldur's Gate III* is a brand new adventure set in the Forgotten Realms as it is today, where Bhaal's unruly kids are history. Not to worry, though, as Larian's got another crisis to fling at the unfortunate city.

With over 20 years of D&D-adjacent RPGs behind it, from *Divine Divinity* to *Divinity: Original Sin 2*, Larian's hardly a wildcard choice, but when CEO Swen Vincke first approached Wizards of the Coast, he didn't get very far. Wizards called the studio "a bit too green" when Vincke tried to convince the publisher during the development of the first *Original Sin*. It was Wizards that got in touch with Larian, however, once *Original Sin 2* was in the works.

"During *Divinity: Original Sin 2*, we had to submit the design for *Baldur's Gate*, which was annoying because we were about to release *DOS2*," Vincke says. "So we sat in a hotel for a weekend the month before release, me and a couple of writers and designers, and we made the initial design document. It wasn't very good, but it had the core ideas and they did like it."

Larian made another version, Wizards loved it, and that became the foundation for *Baldur's Gate III*. Much of that foundation, unfortunately, remains a mystery. The first trailer is appropriately enigmatic until the end, with only a few

hints that it's *Baldur's Gate*. A man with a flaming fist emblazoned on his tunic stumbles across cobbled streets, sweaty and distressed.

The trailer descends into gruesome body horror as he spits up teeth and violently transforms, evoking the appetite-ruining transformations of Akira and An American Werewolf in London, until his final form is unveiled. *Baldur's Gate* is being invaded by mind flayers.

If you've not got your Monster Manual at hand, mind flayers are a race of Cthulhu-looking villains that use their psionic abilities to control their victims and slaves. Their glory days, when they ruled a vast astral empire, are long behind them, and the squid-faced tyrants have been skulking around in the Underdark, impressing the duergar and drow. Unfortunately, they've had an upgrade.

Mind flayers used to be able to travel between worlds via the Astral Plane, piloting massive shells with protruding tentacles known as nautiloids. They made the mind flayers even more formidable, but the art of making new ones has been lost to them. Until now. "Those are big problems," says Vincke. "They want to restore their empire, so we see the mind flayers invading a city with a nautiloid. You can imagine what might happen – but it's not what you'll expect!"

With *Divinity*, particularly the crowdfunded *Original Sin* games, Larian's been free to build its world how it sees fit. With the Forgotten Realms, however, the studio's playing with a licence that's been developed over decades, full of its own lore and rules, but Vincke says it's not been an obstacle.

LORE COPS

"There are a lot of people at Larian who play D&D and there are a lot of game sessions going on continuously, so that already makes it easier because we have the internal lore police. I'm the guy that usually tries to break it, but then I get the lore police on me. Usually that's sufficient, >>

FIRST LOOK

THE STUDIO'S PLAYING WITH A LICENCE THAT'S BEEN DEVELOPED OVER DECADES

PREVIEW

Baldur's Gate III



A natural reaction to hearing about *Baldur's Gate's* return.



Fun fact: mind flayers can suck your brain out of your head.

» and our internal checks sometimes go further than Wizards of the Coast's. They're very flexible about making cool adventures, and most of the things we've pitched to them have been passes. We're really very aligned in our thinking and how we do things, but ours is just the videogame version."

Original Sin 2 already shares quite a lot with D&D, beyond the things that most fantasy RPGs share. The Game Master mode and co-op effectively let you play a tabletop RPG on your PC, but even when you're playing alone it can still feel like you're doing so under the gaze of a Dungeon Master, hoping they'll let you try this brilliant new idea you've come up with. The sheer variety of systems and Larian's willingness to let players bend or occasionally break the game leaves so much room for ingenuity. Vincke loves to talk about players solving conundrums in ways Larian had never even considered, and it's exactly like listening to a proud Dungeon Master gush about their party.

Baldur's Gate III will similarly give players lots of tools and then let them have at it. "We'll stay true to our roots," says Vincke, "so we'll give players lots of systems, and lots of agency to use these systems and try to accomplish what you need to on your adventure.

"That's not going to change; that's the core of what we're doing."

There are some things on the chopping block, however. It's an interpretation of D&D, specifically 5th Edition, because porting the core rules, which Larian tried to do, doesn't work. Or it works, Vincke clarifies, but it's no fun at all. One of the culprits is missing when you're trying to hit an enemy, and while the combat system has yet to be revealed, you can at least look forward to being able to smack people more consistently.

"You miss a lot in D&D – if the dice are bad, you miss," he says. "That doesn't work well in a game. If I do that, you're going to review it and say it's shit. Our approach has been implementing it as pure as we can, and then just seeing what works and what doesn't. Stuff that doesn't work, we start adapting until it does."

This interpretation should still be more true to the tabletop RPG than its

predecessors, however, capturing the feel of D&D even if it's not borrowing every single system and rule.

PARTY PLANNER

To save *Baldur's Gate* you'll need a party of heroes, and like a typical D&D party they're all the protagonists of their own stories, each with their own motivations and ambitions. When you make a character, you'll be filling in your character sheet, essentially, not just with abilities and skills, but backgrounds, personality traits and ideals. While he's not ready to confirm that it will feature in *Baldur's Gate III*, Vincke's also interested in taking another crack at *Original Sin 2*'s origin system, which gives players premade characters with unique backgrounds, quests and talents. They're better defined than their custom counterparts, and more connected to the world.

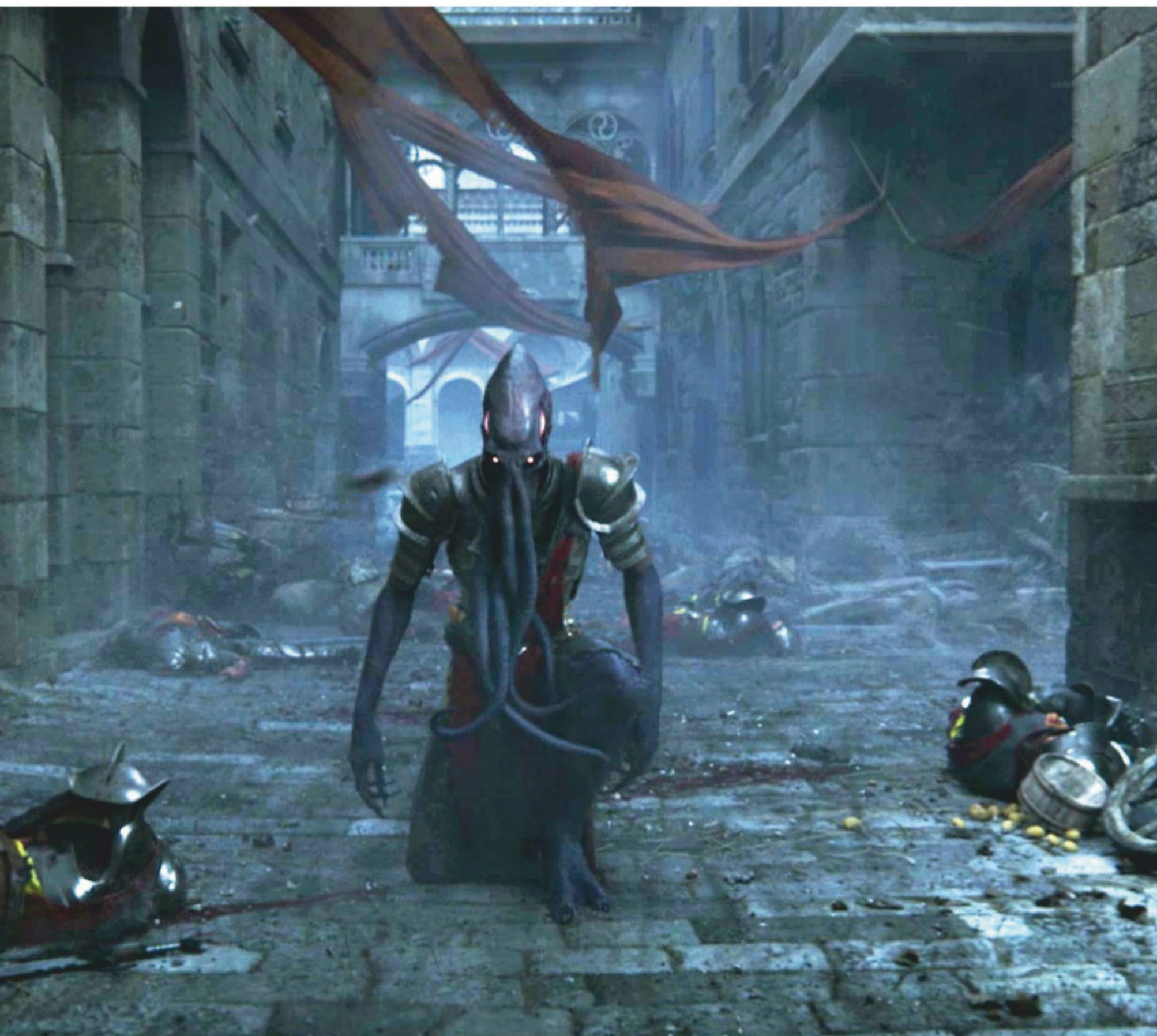
"I thought the origin stories were a really good addition to the RPG genre, and it would be strange if we went back on that," he says. "The ambitions for the origin stories in *Original Sin 2* were actually higher than what we managed to do, though we did it well if you think about all that we fit in there, but there's so much more that can be done with it. I'd certainly be interested in exploring it."

You'll be controlling your whole party, but *Baldur's Gate III* will also let you strike out on an adventure with pals. Larian's not ready to spill the beans on how the multiplayer system will work, but something resembling their last two co-op systems seems likely, letting each player choose exactly where to go and what to do independent of the rest of the party. It's how it works in D&D, too, where parties can split up and one player might be getting sozzled in the tavern while another is trying to pilfer a relic from a temple.

Despite the success of Larian's last two Kickstarters, it won't be going down the crowdfunding route this time. Larian will still be publishing the game itself, as well as involving the community and posting regular updates. For prospective players wanting to follow the game's development, there won't be much of a change. For Larian, though, it's the studio's greatest challenge, and when players finally get to return to *Baldur's Gate*, Vincke thinks they'll be very surprised by what they find. "We're going beyond what we've done before to make it the game it deserves to be. That sounds like a slogan – it is a slogan – but it's true."

Fraser Brown

BALDUR'S GATE III WILL ALSO LET YOU STRIKE OUT ON AN ADVENTURE WITH PALS



DISCLOSURE: Larian senior writer Adam Smith worked at Rock Paper Shotgun when Fraser wrote on the site as a freelancer.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

November 2019

DEVELOPER

Frontier Developments

PUBLISHER

Frontier Developments

LINK

www.planetzoogame.com

PLANET ZOO

Breeding and procedural chimp motion create animal magic

Edinburgh Zoo is famous for its penguin parade. At 2.15pm, punters step off the paths to make way for the King, Gentoo and Rockhopper birds, who march on by the exhibits with their wings stretched out at their sides, as if left in the default T-pose by an animator.

Except for the times when nothing happens. The parade runs on a voluntary basis, and some days the penguins don't feel like it. It's the accepted cost of running a park ethically.

The *Planet Zoo* team has faced similar issues playing their E3 demo. Sometimes, when the camera sweeps over the Serengeti-inspired safari park they've built for the occasion, the crocodiles drift languidly across the water in photogenic fashion. But just as often they stay in bed. And occasionally, a reticulated giraffe interrupts a monologue about the flexibility and depth of the game's building toolkit to plop a big pile of stools in close-up. If nothing else, it's a fine demonstration of Frontier's physics at its smallest scale, as brown lumps jostle and thud to the dirt below. "We are working with live animals here," senior developer Liesa Bauwens says. "They're pretty much impossible to script."

Thankfully, there are places where the behavioural simulation at the conservationist heart of *Planet Zoo* turns out to be a perfect showcase for its creative tools, too. Take the chimpanzees, whose high intelligence makes them demanding residents.



WHEN A MUMMY SPRINGBOK AND A DADDY SPRINGBOK LOVE EACH OTHER VERY MUCH...

A smart way to meet their enrichment needs is to install a climbing frame. As befits a semi-sequel to *Planet Coaster*, these frames are marriages of function and form that can be built any which way. The walls and roofs of nearby buildings can be co-opted as part of their structure, and the chimps will clamber all over these player-defined walkways as if they've always been there. "It's no boast to say that the technology behind the locomotion system is cutting edge," Bauwens says. "Nobody's doing anything like this, and it's extremely difficult."

The procedural chimp parkour is the result of over a year's work by a team of coders. If that seems excessive, it reflects Frontier's determination to fold the creative potential of the *Planet* games back into its management side.

SURVIVAL OF THE CUTEST

Planet Zoo is an advancement on Frontier's last management game, *Jurassic World Evolution*, too. Turns out real-world animals aren't made by researching special rocks you find at dig sites. Instead, when a mummy springbok and a daddy springbok love each other very much, they share their genetic traits. These genes determine not only the patterns in animals' fur, but their size, immunities, fertility, and ultimately the length of their lives.

"We follow our animals' complete life cycle from birth to death," Bauwens explains, "leaving space for both celebration and mourning."

Inbreeding can compromise good traits, and so sorting your animals into the right social groups to rear their young becomes another layer of management. It's a matter of self-education, and it extends to the guests too. In a first for Frontier's management games, you're no longer merely appealing to base desires – for food, drink, and well-situated toilet facilities – but also a desire to learn.

"All of these things are a massive undertaking," Bauwens says. "When we combine the complex animal AI, new staff systems, guest behaviours and a large economic rebalance, all these factors contribute to *Planet Zoo* being a standalone game."

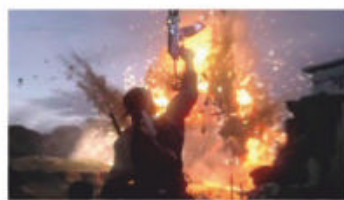
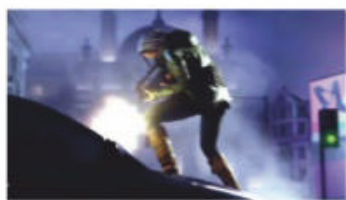
Jeremy Peel



More than anything, this lot want to learn.





Call of Duty: Modern Warfare

Don't point that
thing at me.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 25, 2019

DEVELOPER
Infinity Ward

PUBLISHER
Activision

LINK
www.callofduty.com

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE

Play both as soldiers and 'freedom fighters' in this series re-imagining

There's been a deadly terrorist bombing at London's Piccadilly Circus. The perpetrators have been tracked to a four-story townhouse in North London. British Special Forces prepare to infiltrate the building to capture the terrorist cell's leader known as The Wolf who is presumed to be at the townhouse. All other suspects are to be eliminated.

At a presentation in Los Angeles earlier this month, I got to watch (but unfortunately not play) this mission from the singleplayer campaign of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. Members of developer Infinity Ward laid out a few reasons there isn't a '4' after the title, and why they wanted a "re-imagining" of *Modern Warfare* rather than a sequel. Their goal was to create a game that feels relevant and "ripped from the headlines", and that's pretty hard to do when the storylines of previous *Modern Warfare* games have veered so far from reality.

"In those games, by the time *Modern Warfare 3* was over, nukes had gone off in the world, the Russians had invaded the United States, and so there were really no stakes remaining in that world," says Infinity Ward's Narrative Director Taylor Kurosaki. "So, what we did was we took that storyline and we put it to bed, and we said let's keep all the good stuff, all the stuff you expect from a *Modern Warfare* game and let's transpose it into today's world. It's more mature. It's more authentic. It's more relevant."

The SAS mission I watch is a tense affair as the soldiers – including Captain John Price, who appeared in the original *Modern Warfare* games – creep into the townhouse, position themselves in the narrow hallways, and listen to muffled voices through the building's thin walls. Night-vision goggles are switched on,

FIRST
LOOK

doors are breached, lights are killed, and suspects are snuffed in a cold and efficient manner with silenced weapons. The sequence is disturbingly reminiscent of some of those leaked military videos you might have seen on the internet.

The soldiers have been briefed that the townhouse may also include noncombatants, which requires some quick decision-making. Most suspects are spotted with weapons and some have time to fire back, but a few others are unarmed and even pretend to surrender before suddenly grabbing for a nearby weapon. The only true noncombatant appears to be a woman holding a crying infant on one of the upper floors – everyone else is hostile. One woman even claims she was being held there against her will before suddenly lunging for a detonator. She's shot dead. The Wolf, the only enemy worth taking alive, has escaped, if he was ever even there at all.

That's the small slice of the Tier One operator missions I saw, a tense and methodical engagement in close-quarters combat. It was exciting and felt realistic (with the exception of the player picking up a shotgun off the floor and deciding to use it instead of the weapon he brought on the mission, which seems risky and unlikely). But I also got a look at another mission, a much stranger and more off-putting sequence featuring an entirely different kind of combatant.

GUERRILLA TACTICS

In *Modern Warfare*, you don't spend the entire singleplayer campaign playing as a professional soldier kitted out with expensive gear and access to the best in modern combat technology. You also play as a 'rebel freedom fighter', which presents you with different challenges.

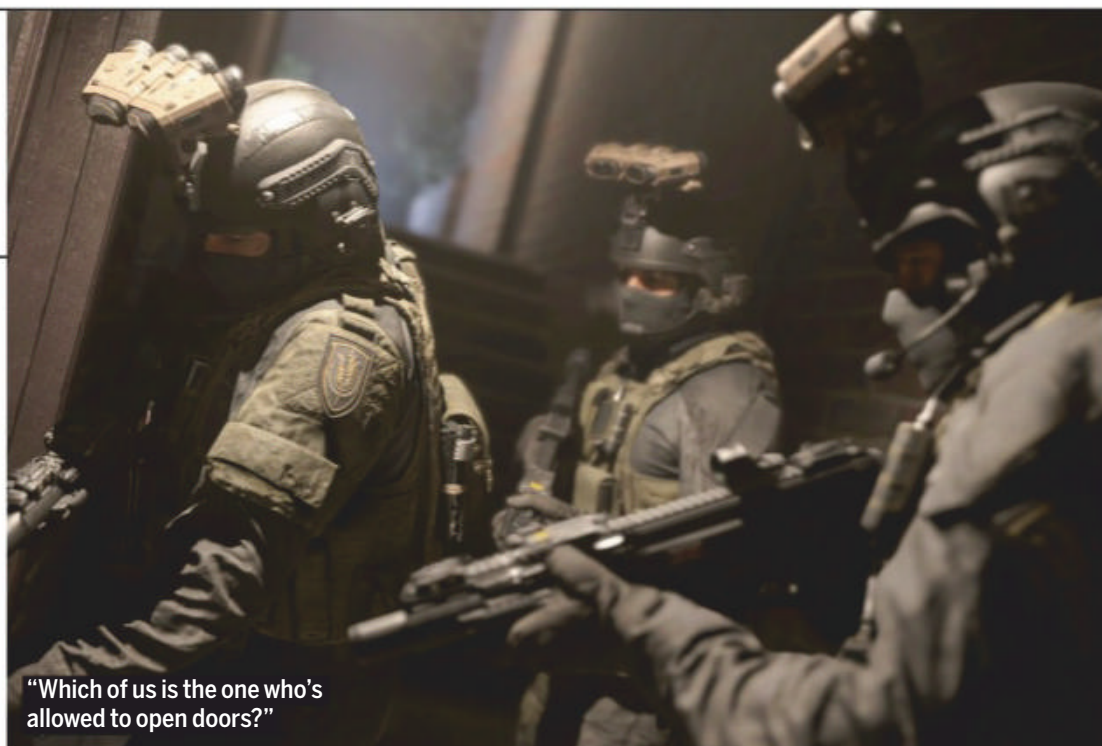
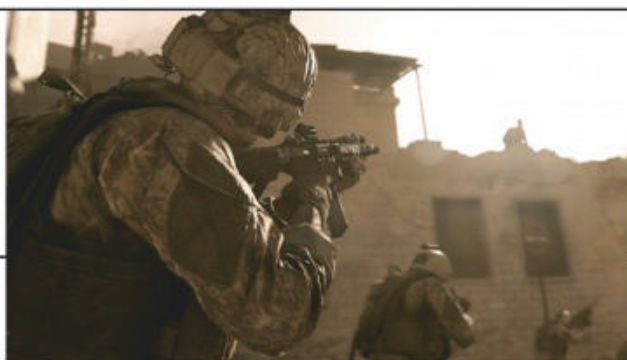
"You're going up against enemies who are technologically superior to you," says singleplayer design director Jacob Minkoff. "All you have are improvised weapons like molotov cocktails, IEDs, and you have superior numbers. But you have

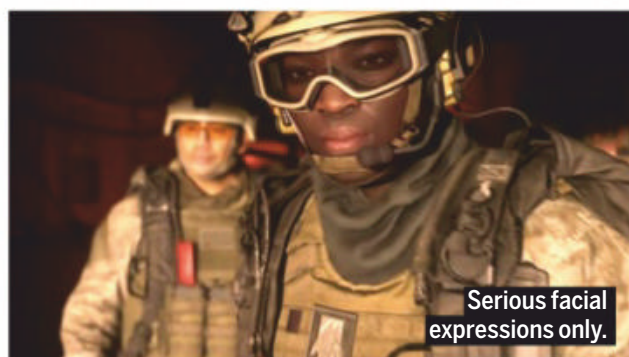
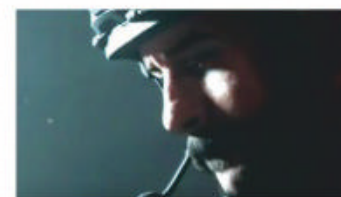
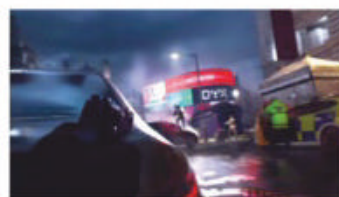
SUSPECTS ARE SNUFFED IN A COLD AND EFFICIENT MANNER WITH SILENCED WEAPONS



PREVIEW

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare

» to use guerrilla tactics, you have to set ambushes, you have to use your superior numbers and your knowledge of the environment against the enemy.”

What I saw, though, wasn't quite that. The mission takes place 20 years prior to the terrorist attack in London, when a young girl who is maybe six or seven years old is dug out of the rubble after a bombing in the Middle East. This is Farah, who will grow up to be the rebel leader you play in *Modern Warfare*, but this is her origin story, and it's a rather familiar one. Her town bombed by military forces and her parents killed in front of her, she's a traumatised child who grows up looking for vengeance. I assumed it was an American bomb that destroyed Farah's town, as that would certainly be relevant and “ripped from the headlines” even 20 years ago. But no, the bombers were part of some sort of Russian military outfit, and in addition to murdering citizens they're also abducting children.

STEALTH SCREWDRIVER

With her father dead, Farah and her young brother hide in their house from a heavily armed, hulking Russian soldier, and rather than fleeing they decide to attack him. The mission looked to me like a tutorial to teach players how stealth works, and little Farah creeps around the house, picks up a screwdriver, and impales the Russian with it. Then she hides again while the Russian pulls the screwdriver out of his body, leaves it on the floor, and continues to search for her. Farah crawls under furniture and through a hole in the walls, retrieves the screwdriver, and stabs him again. This repeats three or four times, until Farah and her brother eventually kill the soldier and then, in true videogame form, immediately attempt to loot his body. It is, quite honestly, a bizarre sequence, and an odd choice to attempt to tell a compelling origin story while also teaching stealth screwdriver attacks and looting mechanics.

Farah and her brother eventually stealth their way out of town and reach a farm, where they find a gun and prepare to take on more Russian soldiers. “This is the most authentic and realistic game we've ever made,” Jacob Minkoff says. I don't

personally find two little kids killing an enormous Russian grunt with a screwdriver particularly realistic, and rather than being ripped from the headlines, Farah's origin story instead appears to be ripped from about 50 different movies and TV shows.

At least there's more impressive weapons than screwdrivers in *Modern Warfare*. As always, a great deal of attention has been paid to making the guns feel realistic, weighty and fun to shoot. Even the tiniest details like idle animations and reloads have been reworked – you can now see yourself perform a tactical reload, which is when you've fired a few shots and your magazine isn't empty but you want to replace it with a fresh one. Rather than your hand simply pulling out the mag, going offscreen, and returning to pop in a fresh mag, you'll actually see your soldier visibly keep the first mag in his hand while replacing with the second. It's a small detail, but an excellent one. And good news, you can now reload while you're aiming down the sights without the gun pulling back to hip-fire position.

The audio is excellent, too, though admittedly I was watching the presentation in a theatre setting and not listening over a headset like most of us will when the game is released. But the finer details of the audio are again impressive, even when it comes to expelled shell casings, which actually make different sounds depending on what sort of surface they land on. The audio even uses ray tracing to deliver realistic sounds, reverb and echoes depending on your position in the environment.

Call of Duty: Modern Warfare is scheduled for release on 25 October and once again on PC it'll be exclusively available on Battle.net. It plans to support cross-platform play at launch and won't have a season pass this time.

Again, I didn't get any hands-on time with *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare's* singleplayer campaign, as this was just a presentation and only provided a brief look at two missions. But in keeping with *Call of Duty's* long history, the re-imagined *Modern Warfare* is looking technically impressive and narratively wobbly. When Infinity Ward says it's going for an authentic and realistic game, I'm more inclined to think they're talking about the authenticity of its gun models and sound effects and animations rather than the content of the story.

Chris Livingston

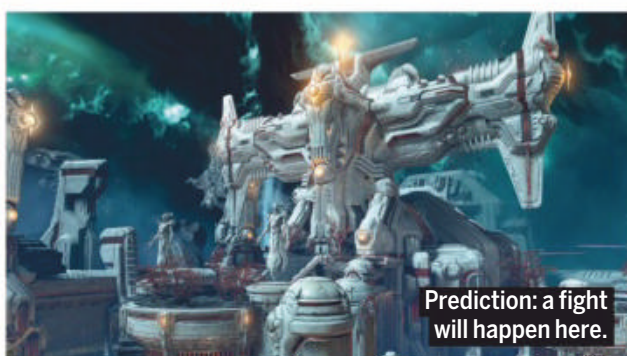
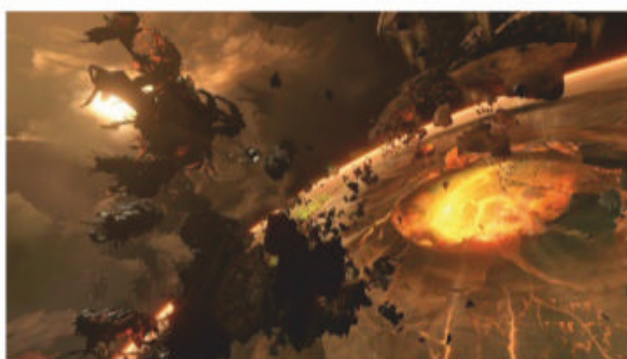
A GREAT DEAL OF ATTENTION HAS BEEN PAID TO MAKING THE GUNS FEEL REALISTIC

PREVIEW

Doom Eternal



Those are some big demons.
Shoot them down to size.



Prediction: a fight
will happen here.



Sure, it's gory. But
it's also free ammo.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2019

DEVELOPER
id Software

PUBLISHER
Bethesda

LINK
www.doometernal.com

DOOM ETERNAL

id's FPS sequel gets the combat just right

My super shotgun has a meat hook attachment. Let's all stop and appreciate that for a second. The shotgun was already super – it's right there in the name. But now it's also got an attachment that grapples onto demonic meatflesh and pulls me towards it. Welcome to *Doom Eternal*.

This feels like the natural successor to 2016's *Doom*, which is to say id Software has had a think about everything that made the original one of the best shooters of the last few years and attempted to push it even further. The super shotgun's meat hook is just one of those ways.

Here's another. In the previous *Doom*, you could stagger demons after doing a set amount of damage. Once staggered, you were able to trigger a 'Glory Kill' – an instant melee takedown that would do something unspeakably violent to the infernal beastie. Doing this would prompt health pickups to spurt from their corpse. At the most fundamental level, *Doom* was about momentum in combat – staying alive by pushing forward, getting up close and personal, and reaping the rewards.

Doom Eternal formalises this philosophy. Once again, you can Glory Kill for health. Once again, you can use your chainsaw to cut ammo from an enemy. Now, though, you can also use a shoulder-mounted flamethrower to set enemies on fire. Kill a burning enemy and they'll burst into a shower of armour pickups. How does this work? It's *Doom*.

KILL A BURNING ENEMY AND THEY'LL BURST INTO A SHOWER OF ARMOUR PICKUPS



Absolutely legless.

Don't ask questions. The key to the system is in how it uses scarcity and resource management. Staggering enemies will run down your ammo. Your chainsaw fuel is limited and must be scavenged from the map. Your flamethrower has a cooldown timer. The idea is that the use of each method should feel meaningful. Combat is a test of knowing what you need and when, and making the most of every tool that you have at your disposal.

It's hard to say for sure based on the short section I played, but *Doom Eternal* feels harder than its predecessor. Gunplay is as loud and brash and gory as ever, but I get the sense that id wants combat to feel like a puzzle.

I play a selection of encounters from the Mars Core level, which starts when the Doom Slayer enters the UAC Orbital Base on Phobos. Fighting his way to the BFG 10,000 – a massive orbital cannon – the Slayer climbs inside of the thing and fires himself towards Mars and its core – a portal leading to the depths of Hell.

KILLING FOREVER

As I collect additional mods for my other weapons, I'm forced to consider how best to utilise each to overcome the various demons thrown my way. A late-mission favourite is the plasma rifle's microwave beam, which stuns enemies while it slowly cooks them. I use it on a Baron of Hell, and – while it takes a while to fully charge – once it does, he explodes, taking nearby enemies with him. More enemies spawn in, and so I switch to the Ballista. Its mod, arbalest, does enhanced damage to flying enemies, making it perfect for the Pain Elemental who's just shown up.

I'm low on ammo now, but I have just enough to switch to my assault rifle for some long range shots against an Arachnotron. Thanks to *Eternal's* monster deformation, its tail-mounted plasma cannon is vulnerable to my rifle's precision bolt. I duck down, chainsaw a Possessed to refill my ammo and I'm back in the fight.

It's fast, fun, silly and cerebral, all in equal measure. id Software clearly knows what it's doing. *Doom Eternal* feels laser-focused on what made the previous game feel so good.

Phil Savage

Wolfenstein: Youngblood



More players means more guns shooting.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

July 26, 2019

DEVELOPER

MachineGames/Arkane Studios

PUBLISHER

In-house

LINK

www.wolfenstein.com

WOLFENSTEIN: YOUNGBLOOD

It takes two in MachineGames' co-op *Wolfenstein* spinoff

Between *Wolfenstein: The New Order* and its (slightly inferior) sequel *The New Colossus*, it seemed like MachineGames had a solid template for what a modern *Wolfenstein* game should be. There was stealth, there was action, there were over-the-top guns (including a shotgun that sounded like the deafening roar of industrial machinery).

Wolfenstein: Youngblood has all of those things, and yet also feels like an entirely different prospect. Let's start with the most obvious change: it's co-op. In place of war hero B.J. Blazkowicz, *Youngblood* stars his twin daughters Sophia and Jessica, a pair who, in their own words, were "born to kill Nazis". An early cutscene shows the two being trained by their parents – being pushed to their limits and beyond.

That training is only now being put into practice, after the pair smuggle away to Paris in search of their missing father. *Youngblood* strikes an odd tone. Appropriately for the 1980s setting it feels like a coming-of-age teen comedy, only warped by the alt-history conceit of a Nazi-ruled Europe. The pair's first actual kill is accompanied by celebration, bravado and vomiting. There's banter and graphic violence, and I don't have a sense of how cleanly these elements will mix.

I also don't entirely have a sense of whether co-op play is a good fit for *Wolfenstein*. There's definitely potential for flanking manoeuvres, cover fire and other co-op standards. If one player is

downed, the other can help them up, and players can even buff one another using their 'pep' action – giving a thumbs up to provide a health boost, or raising 'metal horns' to buff armour.

As a result, the difficulty has naturally been rebalanced. It feels harder, at least at first. As myself and my assigned partner infiltrate a Nazi blimp in the first mission, we're beset by troops from all sides. It's tough. We die a lot. *Youngblood* uses a shared lives system. If you die too much without being revived in time, it's game over – forcing you to restart the level. You can find extra lives in chests throughout the level. We don't find enough. As we wait for the level to reload, my partner leans over and apologises for not being good. I accept, despite being just as responsible for our failure. I'm a bad person.

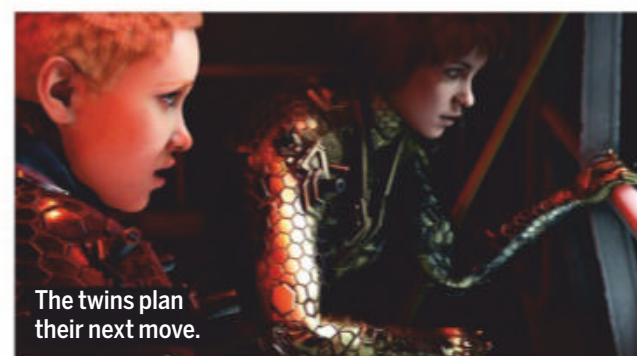
ARMY OF TWO

Things go better as we start to get a handle on the pace of combat. But we never get a chance to try the stealth side of play. Inevitably someone (me) runs straight in, guns blazing, alerting every Nazi in the vicinity to our presence. The one time I do try sneaking – utilising my ability to go invisible – my partner gets spotted trying to find a flanking route. The setup of this hands-on event doesn't lend itself to the granular communication needed for cooperative stealth. Hopefully it'll work better in a different setting – or, if you play solo, with an AI-controlled partner.

I'm also concerned about what the progression system means for combat. Another reason we do better the more we play is that we're levelling up as we go. But enemies also have levels – and health bars. We encounter more than a few bullet sponges as a result, which makes the weapons seem less meaty and satisfying than in previous games.

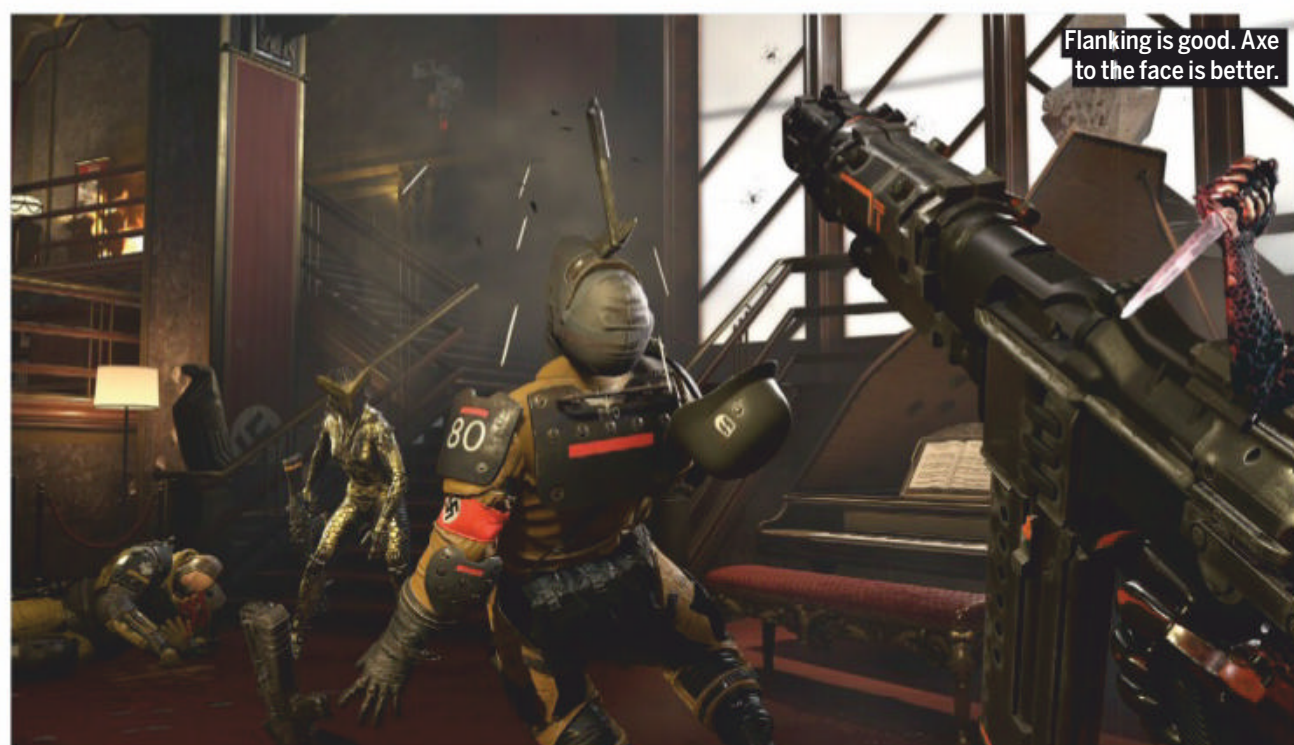
Still, there are positives too. Arkane Studios is helping with level design, and I see a few instances of areas with multiple routes and flanking points. In one, I hang back on a laser turret while my partner gets down and dirty with enemies in the courtyard below. It's the highlight of the session, and hopefully speaks to a *Wolfenstein* spinoff that effectively wields the things that make it different.

Phil Savage



The twins plan their next move.

APPROPRIATELY FOR THE 1980S SETTING IT FEELS LIKE A COMING-OF-AGE TEEN COMEDY



PREVIEW

Knights and Bikes

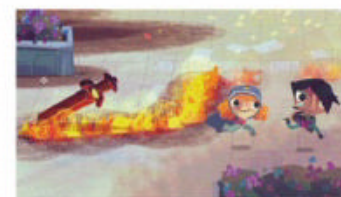
Penfurzy Island's seen better days. The fish can attest to that.



When it rains, go inside and play videogames.



Knights and Bikes



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2019

DEVELOPER
Foam Sword Games

PUBLISHER
Double Fine

LINK
www.foamswordgames.com

KNIGHTS AND BIKES

Capturing the magic of childhood adventures with new friends

Rex Crowle and Moo Yu know how to make games that appeal to children and also the childish sense of wonder that stays with us as adults. Crowle worked on *Tearaway* and *LittleBigPlanet*. Yu's portfolio includes *Ratchet & Clank*. And their first indie game is just as playful as these previous projects.

Knights and Bikes takes place on a fictional Cornish isle called Penfurzy Island. Demelza has lived there her entire life, together with her father who runs the local caravan park. One summer she meets Nessa, and since there's nothing like a new friend to breathe life into familiar places, the two of them set out on an adventure. Despite having charm, Penfurzy Island isn't doing so well, with eviction on the horizon for local businesses. Perhaps digging up the island's cursed treasure will help.

The actual journey isn't very straightforward, as there are many distractions along the way. Over the week the game depicts, both girls find a lot of different games to play and places to explore, just as kids are wont to do. The second day, which I play together with Crowle, is a great showcase of that. We're on our way to feed some geese, running full-tilt through the town's hand-drawn streets. Now and then dotted lines will appear, filling the landscape with something from the children's imagination. The space between two lampposts turns into a goal, for instance. Of course there's also a ball nearby. There's always enough time to

splash around a puddle or kick up dirt, which awards me with small treasures such as yarn or pretty gemstones. Later I will be able to trade it with the adults for something even nicer.

WELLIES AND FRISBEES

Knights and Bikes can be played alone with an AI taking control of the other character, but it's at its best in local or online co-op with another player – how Crowle beat me in an impromptu race to our next destination has become one of my favourite co-op gaming memories. Eventually Demelza and Nessa will both have bikes, which they can customise with different paint jobs and flags, but also better gear to make it further on the island. Once it becomes time to fight the actual curse both girls gain health bars, which can be replenished by high-fiving, a “representation of emotional support rather than the usual videogame items such as health packs”, as Crowle puts it.

Nessa and Demelza are fast friends, and yet the actions you can perform together also reveal a bit of the everyday affectionate rivalry between children.

PLAYED IT

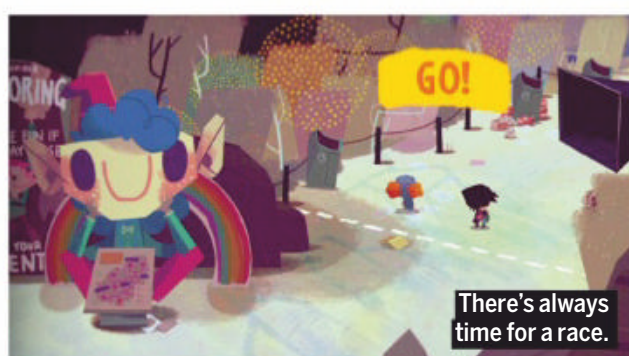
There's lots of splashing each other and attempts at stealing each other's things, but none of it ever ends in a row. After I've met my new favourite videogame character, Captain

Honkers the goose, and debated with Crowle whether or not he will make kids want to pet real geese (not a good idea), our next stop is a mini-golf course, which we complete using anything but clubs.

Between Demelza's mighty kick and Nessa's newly-acquired Frisbee we make short work of the course's different targets, styled to depict the Arthurian legend of the island. Apart from the fun I had following my whims like a kid again, I was struck by how alive everything felt – *Knights and Bikes*' pop-up world is filled with movement and colour, and the girls' smiles rarely falter. There's always plenty to see, and while the game is essentially a linear experience, the different environments always invite you to roam and dig up a few secrets. Crowle's highly recognisable art style makes *Knights and Bikes* instantly memorable and makes each character grow on me. I can't wait to see them again.

Malindy Hetfield

I'VE MET MY NEW FAVOURITE VIDEOGAME CHARACTER, CAPTAIN HONKERS THE GOOSE



There's always time for a race.

PREVIEW

Journey to the Savage Planet

The Savage Planet really seems quite nice.



Oh, wait, is *this* the savagery?



Stupid, trusting pufferbirds.



Journey to the Savage Planet

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2020DEVELOPER
Typhoon GamesPUBLISHER
505 GamesLINK
www.savageplanetgame.com

JOURNEY TO THE SAVAGE PLANET

Exploring a colourful and gross alien world

One of the first things I discover on the *Savage Planet* is an enormous skull, so big I can wander around inside it like a cave. There I kill a few flying octopus monsters and then I see a gigantic pink uvula dangling from that roof of the skull's mouth. I leap up, rip it loose, and quickly eat it.

Well, why the hell not? I'm stranded on this strange alien planet so I'll take my meals where I can find them. And it's not the most disgusting thing I'll do while I'm here.

I recently got to play a short demo of *Journey to the Savage Planet*, a first-person exploration game planned for 2020. It's the first game from Typhoon Studios, which was founded by former creative director of *Far Cry 4* and *Assassin's Creed 3*, Alex Hutchinson, along with other industry veterans from EA and Warner Bros. As an astronaut and pioneer for Kindred Aerospace – they're the fourth-best interstellar exploration company, which is really confidence-boosting – I'm tasked with exploring and cataloguing everything on this wild planet to determine if it's suitable for colonisation by human beings.

I wouldn't even call this planet a particularly savage one, really. There are some hostile creatures here, and I do occasionally hear a deep and ferocious roar in the distance... but how dangerous could whatever's making it be? Everything else here seems either indifferent to me or just plain scared. I laugh when I approach

some short purple dinosaurs and they flee from me, shrieking in fear, sounding for all the world like a maid in a 1950's slapstick comedy who's just seen a mouse.

There are also pufferbirds hopping harmlessly here and there; round little creatures that mean me no harm and who are easily splattered into glop by my gun. I carry cans of compressed cheese with me in my free hand, and when I throw them the pufferbirds scuttle over to eat it. This is useful when I need to, say, trick the pufferbirds into flocking into the maw of a plant with spinning fan blades for a mouth. Those pufferbirds are very trusting.

DEEPER UNDERGROUND

The planet may not be terribly savage at the moment, but it is an extraordinarily bright and colourful one. It's also a bit tricky to navigate. *Savage Planet* has a first-person platformer feel to it, with cliffs and ledges and areas that take some puzzling over before you can figure out how to reach them. I find myself trying to reach a peak and having to circle around and try different methods of hopping and climbing to reach it.

One of my first tasks is to find the necessary resources to craft a grappling hook, which I assume will make getting around much easier, but I keep getting sidetracked by alluring new areas of the planet. Which is a good thing! Alien planets are meant to be explored and I don't want to simply follow a quest marker for fear of missing something unusual or interesting.

Seeing as how I'm armed with a scanner I naturally want to identify and catalogue every species I can. During my demo I never even get around to crafting my grappling hook, but in an extended spelunking expedition into an underground cavern I do find a sort of spore grenade, which I can fling into the world and create a giant springy growth I can bounce around on. There is also a mysterious glowing altar underground that I can't figure out the purpose of.

I'm eager to see more of *Savage Planet*. In just the tentative bit of exploring there seemed to be all manner of different biomes to discover, and I look forward to exploring more dungeons, and meeting more oddball creatures.

Chris Livingston

PLAYED
IT

Hold the mushrooms.

I KEEP GETTING SIDETRACKED BY ALLURING NEW AREAS OF THE PLANET

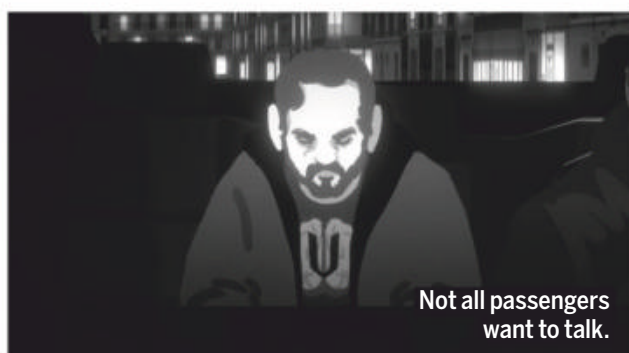
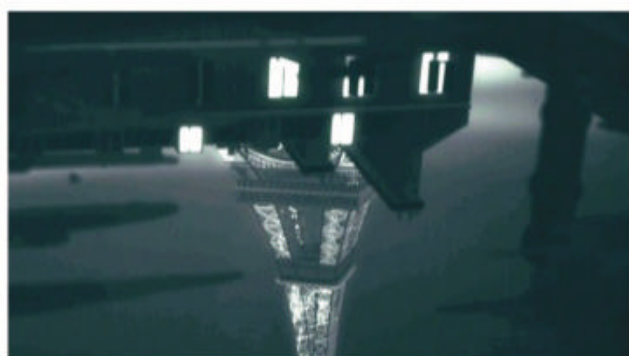
Night Call

This detective coerces you into working for her.



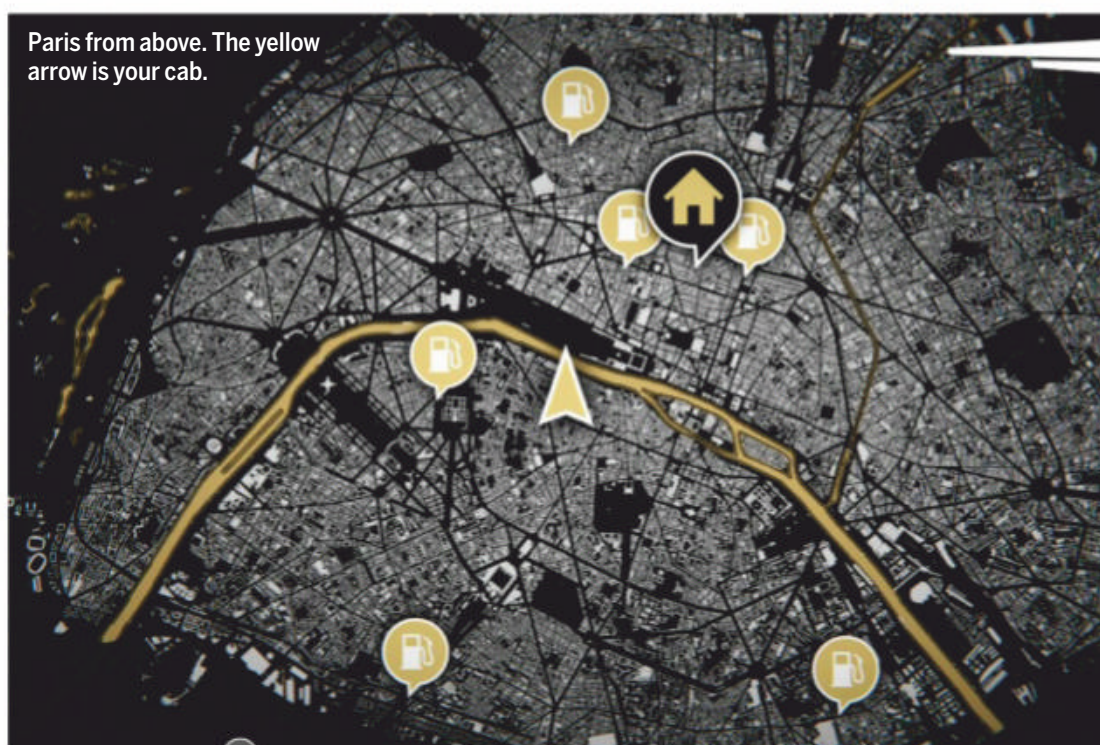
BUSSET

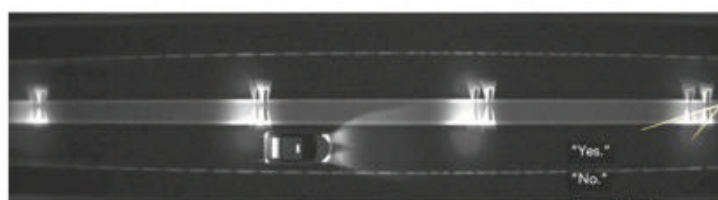
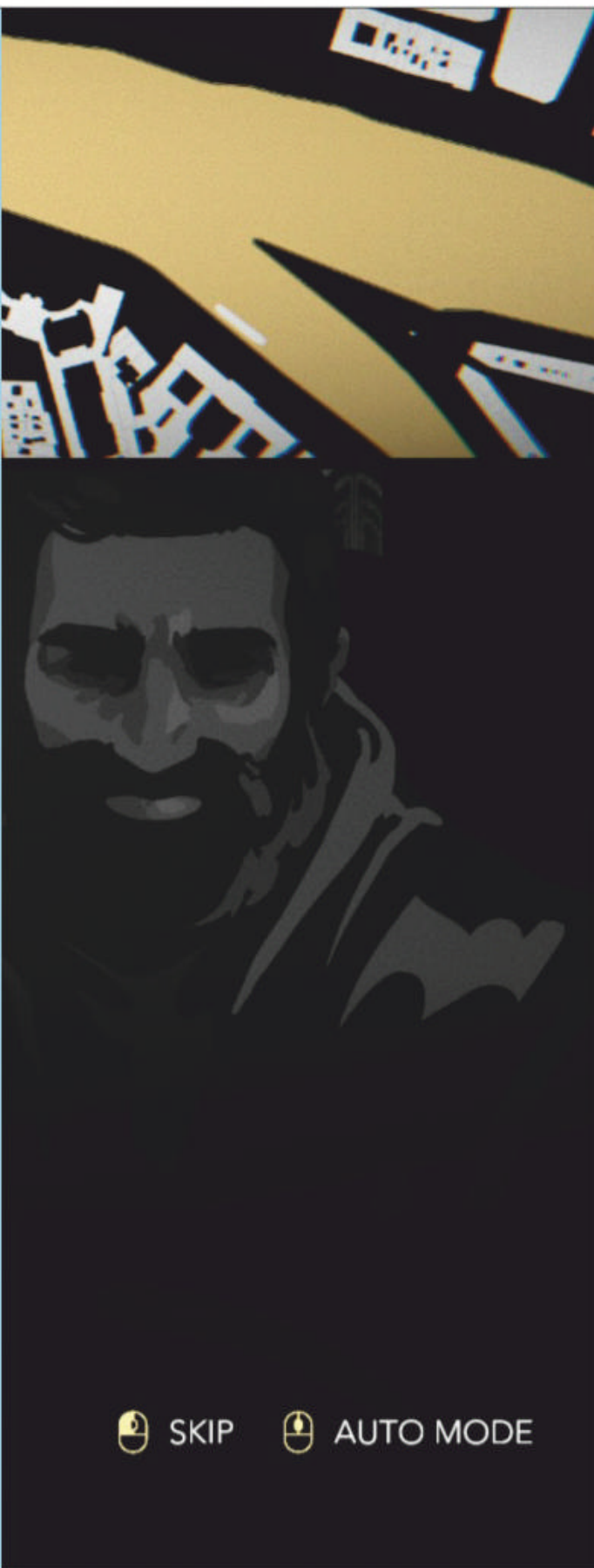
Don't get caught. Don't get arrested. Also, I wouldn't recommend trying to leave Paris. I know what you look like and I know who your friends are.



Not all passengers want to talk.

Paris from above. The yellow arrow is your cab.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2019

DEVELOPER
Monkey Moon, Black Muffin

PUBLISHER
Raw Fury

LINK
www.nightcall-game.com

NIGHT CALL

A moody murder mystery set on the streets of Paris

Paainted in shades of black and white, this stylish noir murder mystery is set on the perpetually rain-soaked streets of Paris. You, a taxi driver, fall prey to a serial killer the police call The Judge. But against all odds you survive and soon find yourself hunting for the killer at the request of a desperate detective. She has dirt on you, she says.

Presented with a top-down map of Paris, I click on a man's face and find myself driving over to him. Well, I watch the yellow arrow representing my cab automatically head in his direction. He wants to go to Issy, a suburb in the southwest of Paris, and I'll receive €16 for the pleasure. The camera switches to inside the cab as the passenger taps away on a laptop, completely uninterested in his driver. I'm given the option to start a conversation with him, but he seems like he'd rather do anything else – at least until, noticing the way he's typing, I ask if he's a programmer.

Suddenly we're having a deep conversation about religion. He asks if I believe in God. I can remain silent, but I decide to share. I tell him I used to, but I don't anymore. He tells me he believes the world is a computer simulation. The way the text flows and dialogue choices are presented in *Night Call* give it the feel of a visual novel. I can click through our conversation, or I can sit back and watch it unfold automatically until it's my turn to respond. We finally reach Issy and I drop the man off. He gives me a nice tip and

disappears into the night. I feel like I wanted to talk to him more, but I suppose these kinds of fleeting relationships are part of the deal as a taxi driver.

I'm back on the map and I pick up another passenger. He wants to go to the Charles de Gaulle Airport, insisting that I get there promptly. However, this guy isn't nearly as charming as my previous passenger. He's a self-proclaimed pickup artist. As he boasts about his successes he preens himself in the mirror. I'm given the opportunity to call him an asshole and I take it. He's stunned and when I drop him off he doesn't leave me a tip.

I really love *Night Call's* presentation. The monochrome art, understated ambient music, and the sound of the rain falling make for a palpable atmosphere. I also love how, as you engage in conversations, the view switches to show, say, the taxi driving along from above, or a view through the window of the city streaking past. Taxi Driver is a clear influence on the direction. There's a little Michael Mann in there too, in how it evokes the oppressive, claustrophobic feeling of a big city at night.

PLAYED
IT

TALKIN' TO ME?

The night ends and I'm given a tally of how much I earned, minus my employer's cut, taxes, and other expenses. I finish my shift with just €18 and I wonder if I should've been nicer to the airport creep. Nah. Before I turn in for the night I look through a pile of evidence from the Judge murders, which was given to me by the detective I met earlier. This aspect of the game hasn't been implemented in my preview build, but it seems that piecing clues together to unmask the killer will be a big part of the game. But for now all I can do is go to bed.

Night Call makes a great first impression. The developer has nailed the feeling of driving through a city at night, and I love the anticipation of what each person you pick up will be like. It's also cool how the story feeds into the systems, such as the jerk I offended not giving me a tip. The real test of the game will be the detective stuff, however. I'd have been happy with a game purely about the everyday life of a taxi driver, but the murder mystery element is intriguing.

Andy Kelly

The design is super stylish.

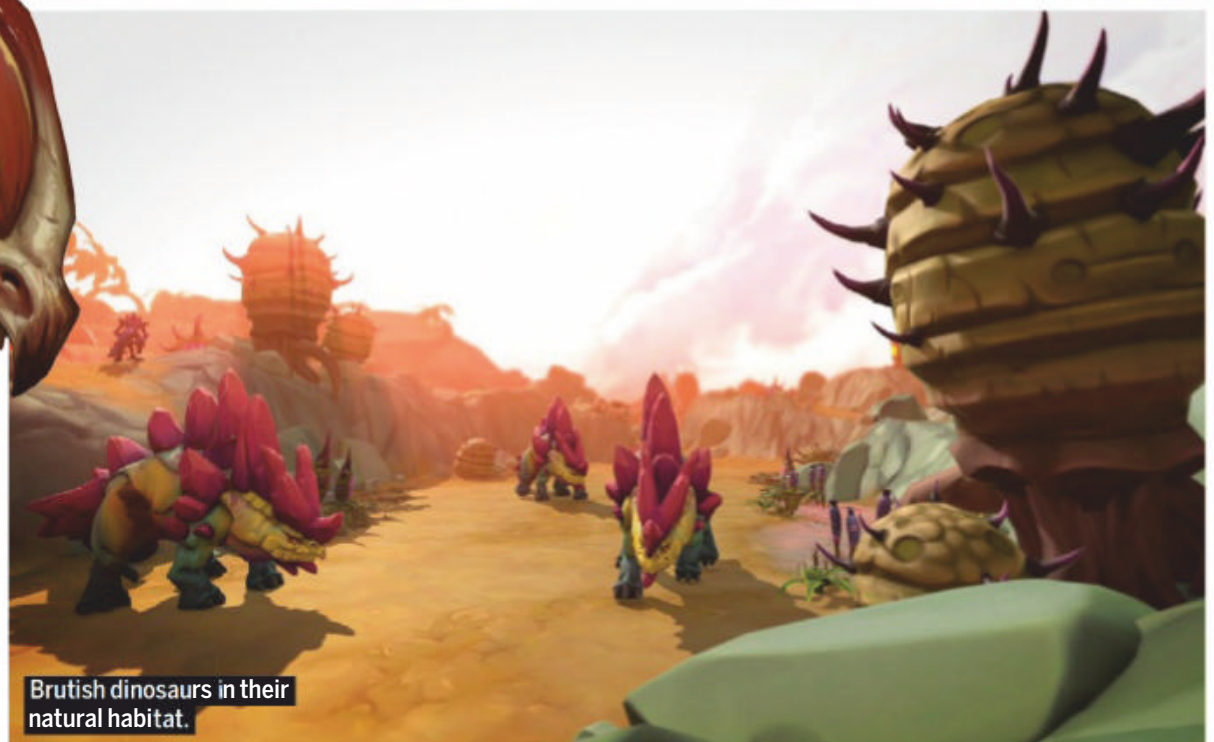
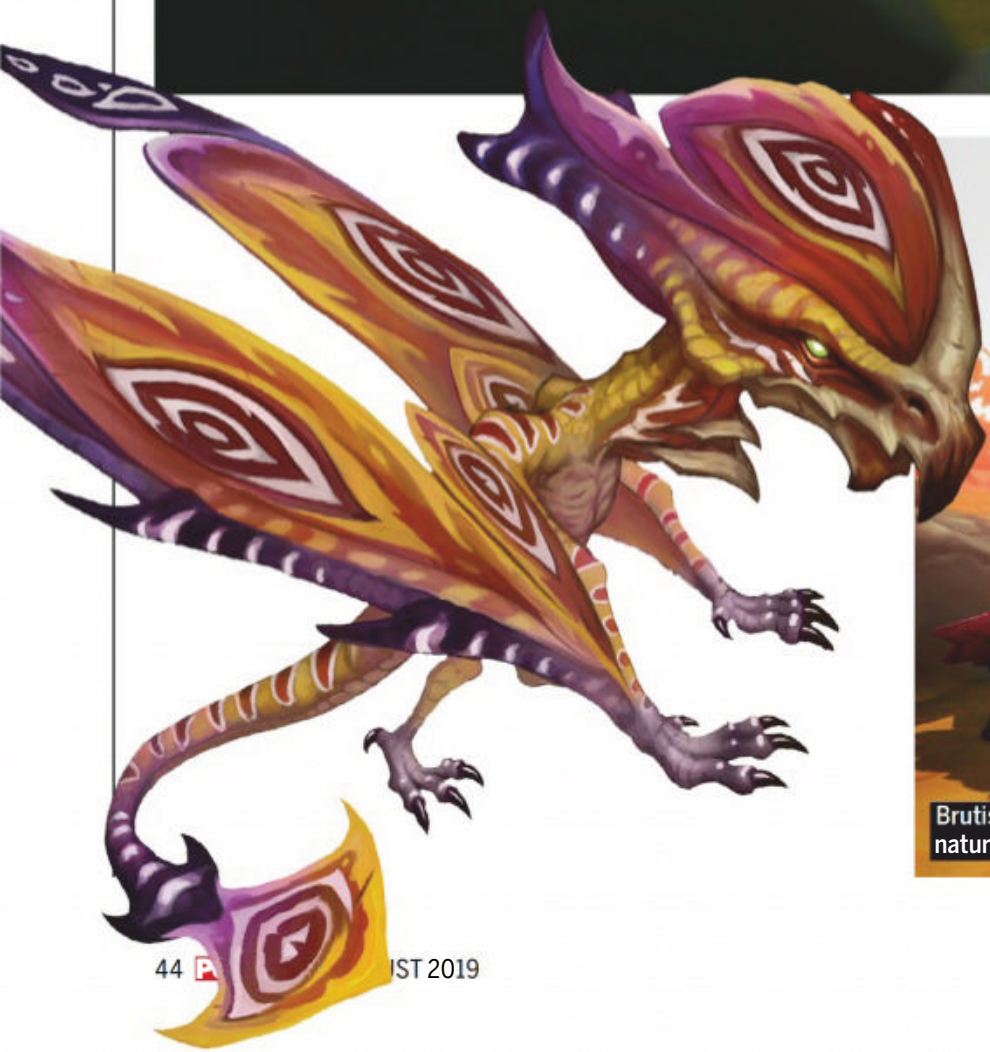


THE DEVELOPER HAS NAILED THE FEELING OF DRIVING THROUGH A CITY AT NIGHT

PREVIEW

RuneScape

Probably listening to
Sea Shanty 2. Hipster.



Brutish dinosaurs in their
natural habitat.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
July 1, 2019

DEVELOPER
Jagex

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
www.runescape.com

RUNESCAPE

A first look at Anachronia, the Land Out of Time

Over ten years ago, the concept of dinosaurs in *RuneScape* was the scientific formula for my teenage self's perfect adventure. But how did this come about and how is *RuneScape*'s biggest update looking for players? I visited Jagex for my own personal trip into the Land Out of Time.

This new island was first teased to the public on May 21 in the form of a bite-sized trailer. It shows the mysterious boat that was recently placed beside the newly reworked Dig Site. Before departure, players will have to work together to get the boat shipshape and ready to sail to Anachronia. Once there, you'll realise the grand scale of what you're dealing with as a bipedal T-rex chases you all the way to the safety of a rundown but fortified outpost.

It's here that you can begin construction on amenities like the town hall and merchant stands. The player then gets to work on asserting dominance over the local wildlife. Just be sure not to underestimate the cute little raptors – they hunt in packs. “We wanted to provide a twisted fairytale feel to surprise and delight our players, but at the same time ensure it's something that you'd expect from a *RuneScape* update,” says project lead Kevin Grantham-Murray. “Anachronia allows us to provide new content but also use locations like the temple to allude to future quests.”

Ask any *RuneScape* superfan for their favourite nuance and there's a good

chance it will be the Examine option. Back in my early *RuneScape* days, I would examine everything from raw potatoes to quirky NPCs. When stepping foot on Anachronia's shores, my magnifying glass was put to good use as I prowled the environment for those witty gems. A standout one-liner belonged to the Asciatops itself and referenced *RuneScape*'s most iconic OST, reading, “It looks like a punk rocker but secretly loves Sea Shanty 2.”

TIME'S UP

The dinosaurs in Land Out of Time were more vibrant than I expected. In total, the Jagex team designed over 50 dinosaurs, but only the most interesting will make it into the update itself.

“Our main requirement was that they had to be colourful, flamboyant but recognisable as dinosaurs,” lead concept artist Daniel Barker told me. “The player shouldn't have to look at them and ask themselves, ‘What the hell is this thing?’ They need to stand out in an already colourful environment. Of course, we cry when our little darlings are killed! But we can always use them for something else later down the line.”

When finally going toe-to-toe with these vibrant monstrosities, players should expect a battle of wits rather than typical combat. Capturing one of the dinosaurs requires lots of sneaking around to assemble harpoon traps and gather resources like wood and vines. Meanwhile, your quarry is patrolling the perimeter and will be vexed if it spots you in its cone of vision. Fortunately, there's long grass to hide in, which gives this a *Monster Hunter* meets *Metal Gear* feel.

Other than combat, plenty of activities await the player. The island is vast – although smaller than the notorious Wilderness – and sports one of the largest Agility courses in the game. This eight minute trek across vines, fallen trees and rocky slopes is the perfect way to explore the island on first arrival. Players may even stumble across Clue Scrolls to decipher, and it'd be rude not to climb the temple to admire the sun setting over this paradise. Combined with a whole outpost to rebuild, Anachronia is a skiller's playground that is set to only get bigger.

Alex Sprackling

NEW
UPDATE

A BIPEDAL T-REX CHASES YOU ALL THE WAY TO THE SAFETY OF A RUNDOWN OUTPOST

Not all plants are what they seem.



V'S A

How choice, freedom and Keanu Reeves make
CYBERPUNK 2077 the most exciting game of E3.

CROWD

Feature by Phil Savage, boxouts by Andy Kelly

COVER FEATURE

Cyberpunk 2077

In the new CGI trailer for *Cyberpunk 2077*, unveiled at Microsoft's Xbox E3 Briefing, main character V is having a bad day. His partner, Jackie Welles, is dead. His fixer, Dexter DeShawn, has betrayed him. When he regains consciousness, he's lying in a garbage dump. "Wake the fuck up samurai," says a voice. "We have a city to burn." The source of that voice? It's Keanu Reeves.

Cue rapturous applause as Reeves appears on stage to talk about his appearance in CD Projekt Red's next RPG. It was an exciting surprise in an industry event that rarely keeps a secret for long.

But who is Reeves' character, and why is he so interested in V?

"Keanu Reeves in our game plays the role of Johnny Silverhand," says Paweł Sasko, lead quest designer for *Cyberpunk 2077*. "Johnny Silverhand is the frontman of Samurai, a chrome rock band from 2020, from the original [pen-and-paper RPG] book. Now, Johnny Silverhand is a primary character in our game, and the player, V, has him on a chip in his head as this digital ghost."

Johnny will be a presence throughout the game, although it's not clear what his motivation is for helping V. "The thing is that Johnny Silverhand has his own agenda," says Sasko. "He used to be a fighter for freedom, but in the eyes of corporations he would probably be called a terrorist." Sasko characterises Silverhand as someone with a strong vision of how the world should work, "He's a true cyberpunk. He's the guy who goes against the system, against

the corporations, and against the city that's just an embodiment of this."

Which brings us back to his line in the trailer. Silverhand clearly wants something, and is trying to influence V to help achieve that goal. "It starts this interesting dynamic between them," says Sasko. "And he has his own role that develops throughout the game. 'We have a city to burn'. He means something very specific by that."

The damaged biochip implanted in V's head does more than just allow him (or her) to commune with a digital ghost. It also supposedly contains the secret to immortality. This is one of the driving plot points of the brand new behind-closed-doors E3 demo – a 50 minute developer playthrough of a never before seen chunk of the game.

To find out more about the chip, V travels to Pacifica. Planned as Night City's luxury tourist destination, the district sits decrepit and impoverished after the corporations pulled their support. It's now the home of the Voodoo Boys, an insular, secretive gang obsessed with cyberspace. V wants to meet their leader, Brigitte, in the hope that she can reveal more about the biochip.

The demo starts as V walks up to a mirror – letting CD Projekt Red run through some of the character customisation options. As revealed last year, *Cyberpunk 2077* doesn't have a defined main character. You can pick their gender, their appearance and even their origin story. "You start by picking your life path, so Nomad, Corporate or Street Kid," explains Sasko.

"That gives you some predefined number of things – your equipment and background and so on."



Your life path also affects how you interact with characters. Some dialogue choices are locked to a specific life path. Others are locked behind skill proficiency, meaning a character adept at hacking will have different choices to one who's very good at punching. "That helps out because it opens a new branch in the story. Sometimes it's a small thing. Fairly often it's something bigger, because we always try to make sure there's enough meat that the players are rewarded for investing in it."

Customisation done, V steps away from the mirror. "Really think they give a rat's dick about how you look?" quips Silverhands.

URBAN SPRAWL

Later in the demo, V meets up with a Voodoo Boys contact, Placide. He leads V through the streets of Pacifica towards the gang's HQ. The district itself feels different to the dense urban skyscrapers showcased in last year's demo. You can see the rough shape of its original purpose – a suggestion of vibrancy that never truly materialised.

We also get a sense of the day-to-day lives of its current inhabitants, thanks to an upgrade to V's scanner that translates the Haitian Creole spoken by its residents in real-time.

Placide stops to point out a giant building in the distance. The Grand Imperial Mall, once envisioned as the main attraction of the district, is now a half-finished

ABOVE: V rides his bike into Pacifica, a district of Night City filled with gang-ravaged slums.

BOTTOM LEFT: Despite the name, by day Night City is much brighter and sunnier than most videogame dystopias.





monument to corporate greed. It's recently been taken over by the Animals, a gang of juiced-up beefcakes who value strength above all else. It seems like a quest is starting to form.

Sure enough, back at the Voodoo Boys HQ, Placide states that he'll only let V speak to Brigitte if he helps solve the Animal problem. After jacking into the Voodoo Boys' subnet – allowing Placide to watch V's every move – he explains that someone has been supplying the Animals with military-grade gear. V's job is to find out who's driving the van that's been making the deliveries.

Even this basic scene, which ultimately serves to give the player a new quest, is fraught with tension. Not only is Placide pushy and demanding, he's clearly hiding something, likely related to a commotion in a nearby room. The player has plenty of opportunity to call him on his bullshit, and to demand an explanation for what's really going on, but doing so might only serve to piss off the person we're reluctantly helping.

But maybe that's worth the risk. Sasko summarises *Cyberpunk 2077*'s philosophy as 'freedom'. "If the

player feels like they should be able to do something, they probably should. We are always doing our best to let you do it in our game. If a character pisses you off, there's probably an option to shoot him and all kinds of things like that."

Naturally that freedom extends to how you execute your missions. On reaching the Grand Imperial Mall, we see V attempt some stealth, sneaking past gang members before coming to a corridor guarded by a camera. As a Netrunner, this V can make use of a cyberdeck to hack into a nearby access point, gaining control over some of the buildings systems. Not only can V disable the camera, but, in the next room – a gym various members of the gang are working out in – he's able to turn the apparatus against them.

One of the Animals is in a boxing ring, sparring against a training bot. V tweaks the bot's difficulty setting until it punches the gang member to death. Around the corner, he hacks into a weightlifting bench so that it crushes the Animal working out on it. Upstairs, V hacks a vending machine, causing it to light up and distract a couple of guards. This seems tame in comparison to the previous

WOAH

Keanu Reeves is a true cyberpunk



Keanu Reeves is no stranger to bleak sci-fi visions of the future. He was, of course, the star of *The Matrix* – the story of an office drone who learns that the world is a simulation created by machines. He also starred in *Johnny Mnemonic* (the film *The Matrix* could have

been) as a cyber-hacker in a world dominated by megacorporations. And in the film adaptation of Philip K. Dick's *A Scanner Darkly* he played an undercover agent working for a government engaging in invasive high-tech surveillance of its citizens.



shenanigans... right up until V pulls out his razor sharp nanowire and slices them to bits.

MIND CONTROL

Clearly *Cyberpunk 2077* doesn't shy away from violence. In a later section, V uses the nanowire to hack into one of the Animals, gaining access to their internal network. Thanks to this, and a software daemon purchased and installed earlier in the demo, V is able to turn the guards against themselves, forcing one to remove the pin of their grenade, and another to shoot themselves in the head. It was, I have to say, a bit much.

Not every playthrough will be this grisly, however. "We have a completely nonlethal path throughout the whole game," says Sasko. Of course this is a dangerous, violent world, so you have to harm

people sometimes. But you don't have to kill anybody. Any of the quests, street stories, open world content – you can go through the whole thing killing nobody."

To support this almost every weapon and cyberware installation will have a nonlethal mode. "The only exception is weapons that are lethal by definition," says Sasko. "So let's say you shoot someone in the face with a bazooka. You shoot his head off. That's typically lethal. There are weapons that are so lethal that it cannot go any other way. But everything else actually has a nonlethal option."

CDPR skips back and shows how the section would look with a completely different build. *This V* is a Solo. Unlike the Netrunner, she doesn't have access to a cyberdeck, meaning she can't hack the access point to disable the camera at the start of the level. Instead, she has plenty of combat skills and a pair of

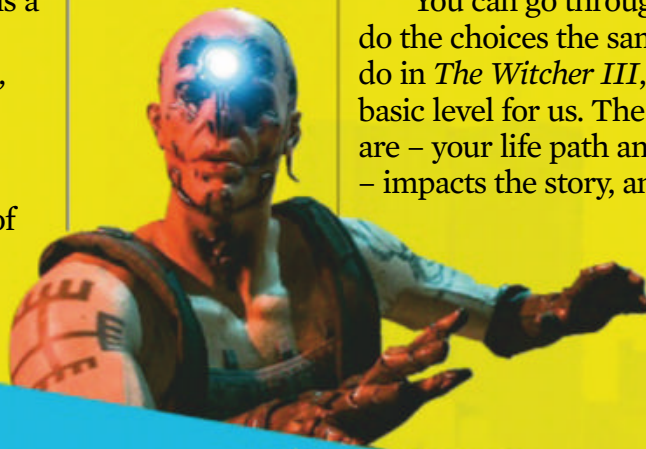
ABOVE: Buying upgrades on the black market is the best way to stay at the top of the cyber foodchain.

cyberarms. Thanks to her strength, she's can pry open a door that the Netrunner V couldn't get through.

After being spotted by one of the Animals, she dispatches her foes using throwing knives, broken bottles and, when all else fails, just her very lethal robo-arms. Where the Netrunner V hacked the turret guarding the van that he was sent to investigate, the Solo V just rips it out of its mounting and uses it to gun down everyone in sight.

"In *The Witcher III* we did focused, branching storylines in the open world," says Sasko. "In this game, we're actually adding to it with branching gameplay. And that also impacts the story.

"You can go through the quest and do the choices the same way you can do in *The Witcher III*, but that's the basic level for us. The character you are – your life path and your build – impacts the story, and impacts the



ALTERNATE HISTORY

Key dates that shape Cyberpunk's bleak future

1989

A sinister organisation made up of high-ranking members of the CIA, NSC, FBI, and DEA secretly runs the United States behind the President's back.

1994

A nuclear meltdown occurs in Pittsburgh, PA. Almost 300 people die and cancer rates skyrocket. The exclusion zone around the reactor is named The Pitt.

1996

A catastrophic societal collapse begins. Martial law is established in the United States, the President is killed, and street gangs take control of the country.

2002

An event called the Food Crash occurs. Crops around the world are ravaged by a virus, but the United States defeats it by developing a counter-agent.

2004

The first Corporate War begins. Two megacorps, Euro Business Machines and Orbital Air, engage in a campaign of cyber-warfare after a deal falls through.

2017

The first self-aware human clone is created, NASA launches a manned mission to Mars, and London is flooded when terrorists bomb the Thames Barrier.



Animals is an agent of NetWatch – a government agency looking to destroy the Voodoo Boys. The agent attempts to parlay, explaining that Placide is just using V to stop the agent's cyberattacks from taking out Brigitte and the gang – perhaps the reason for the commotion back at Voodoo HQ. Worse still, the agent suggests that Placide is planning to kill V after the job is done. There are a lot of ways this could go – including joining up with the agent. But, in the demo, V decides it's better the devil she knows.

She attempts to put a stop to the NetWatch attack, but is immediately double crossed by Placide. He uses his connection to V to shut down the attack himself – killing everyone connected to it in the process. But V doesn't actually die – possibly due to that chip. At Silverhand's suggestion she goes to confront Placide. Instead, she

meets Brigitte. The final sequence of the demo sees Brigitte fulfil her end of the bargain, leading V into cyberspace and to the Black Wall that acts as a bridge to the deep net. Brigitte explains that nobody has returned from beyond the Black Wall, but that Alt Cunningham – Silverhand's ex-girlfriend, and the first Netrunner to become a fully digital entity – will be the first. The wall buckles from the other side as something violently crashes into it. And then the demo ends.

When I first saw *Cyberpunk 2077* last year, it seemed beyond impressive, to the point that it felt like something that I wouldn't be playing for many, many years. This year, with this demo, it seems more achievable in its size and scope. Its RPG systems are familiar. Its immersive sim combat is easy to understand. It reminds me of *Deus Ex*, but with more choice, freedom and Keanu Reeves. That's an excellent thing to be. ■

ABOVE LEFT: The detail in the chaotic, overcrowded Night City is remarkable.

LEFT: Keanu Reeves is Johnny Silverhand, frontman of 'chrome rock' band, Samurai.

BELOW: The problem with being part human, part machine is that people can hack you.

paths you're taking when you're playing in a given part. For instance, you saw, in the Grand Imperial Mall, you could go through different barriers different ways. And when talking to characters, having different skills impacts what I can pick. So that even branches out. It's like natural evolution from the first *Witcher* branching story and open world. Now it's also branching gameplay."

What's most interesting to me about the different builds shown is that it's not an either/or situation. Classes are designed to be fluid – another example of CDPR's philosophy of freedom – meaning that if you want to play as a Solo that can use a cyberdeck and hack into access points, you can. The classes, skills, software and cyberware installations offer incredible scope for defining your preferred playstyle.

CHOOSE WISELY

Of course, your actions and dialogue choices will impact the outcome of quests and your relationships with the people you meet. Even your relationship with Silverhand will change based on your actions.

After reaching the van, however players ultimately choose to do it, V discovers that the person arming the

"YOU CAN GO THROUGH THE WHOLE THING KILLING NOBODY"



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A LONG TIME AGO

How **KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC** stayed true to the Star Wars 'used universe'.

By Alex Kane

W

hat makes a movie, comic book, or video game feel like Star Wars? This is the question every creator has to wrestle with when they're approached to work on a story set in that universe.

When George Lucas began working on the original Star Wars in the 1970s, his aim was to make a film that looked timeless – never mind the endless budgetary and technical limitations he had to contend with. Production designer John Barry and set decorator Roger Christian proposed the notion of a “used universe”, a term that's come to be associated with Lucas and the success of the classic trilogy over the years. The idea was to avoid the polished chrome and utopian vistas of earlier science fiction movies in favour of something a bit more tangible: the grimy, kitbashed, lived-in aesthetic of the Mos Eisley cantina or the Millennium Falcon. Props and sets could be assembled from existing parts, and in turn the whole production would be less expensive.

BioWare insisted on following these same design principles during the making of *Knights of the Old Republic*. One look at the game's cover is all it takes to spot the similarities – the rusty flying-saucer pirate ship, the hero brandishing her laser sword, the R2-D2 and C-3PO analogues, the Universal-monster-movie villain.

“The reason I draw pictures, what galvanised me as a ten-year-old boy, was Star Wars on the big screen,” says John Gallagher, who designed most of the game's characters and costumes. “It changed my life.”

Gallagher worked in broadcasting, writing and producing television commercials, prior to joining BioWare. Like most of his peers, he was a neophyte in the games world. “But I've drawn my entire life,” he says. “Anybody who knows me knows that, from the time I could hold a crayon, that's really what I was doing. It was kind of in my DNA.” He spent a total of nine years with the company, witnessing its humblest beginnings and staying on until 2004, two years into development on *Dragon Age: Origins*.

KotOR is a particularly cherished memory for Gallagher because it gave him the chance to meet his hero – Star Wars production illustrator Ralph McQuarrie.

JEDI COUNCIL

In 2001, following months of preparation, work on the game began in earnest. “Once the post-orgasm

This is an extract from *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, published by Boss Fight Books and written by Alex Kane. Boss Fight Books publish nonfiction works about classic games, including *Jagged Alliance 2*, *Baldur's Gate II*, *World of Warcraft* and more. For more, visit bossfightbooks.com.





“glow [of getting the Star Wars licence] was diminishing,” Gallagher says, “we had to get down to business.” All of the team leaders on the project at BioWare flew down to the San Francisco Bay Area to spend a day with the Lucas camp. For the art team – Gallagher, lead animator Steve Gilmour, and art director Derek Watts – that meant a trip “across the pond” to Berkeley, where McQuarrie and his wife lived. There, the BioWare folks were treated like visiting dignitaries. They got to hold the Oscar that McQuarrie had won for Best Visual Effects with *Cocoon*. McQuarrie showed them his original work, offered advice, and shared stories about “George and the old days”.

“That was life-changing,” Gallagher says. “I got to sit at the feet of the master and spend a few hours with him. He was an extraordinary human being, and just a natural

pleasure to spend time chatting with. And you feel like the circle’s complete. If Ralph gives you a thumbs-up, then you feel like ‘Okay, now I can go do this’. And he’d entertained diplomats and kings. I was just another asshole who drew pictures.”

Most artists struggle with some degree of impostor syndrome – the fear that, no matter what they accomplish

MCQUARRIE HAD SOME WORDS OF WISDOM FOR THE ARTISTS

in their chosen creative field, sooner or later they’ll be exposed as frauds. Even if your name is Ralph McQuarrie. Even if many credit you with envisioning the singular look of the entire Star Wars universe.

McQuarrie told Gallagher about a stroll he took one night in 1977. He liked to go for walks in abandoned spaces – at the docks, in industrial zones, in warehouse districts. On this particular night, though, McQuarrie happened to be on Hollywood Boulevard.

“He was walking along, a little bit of a breeze blowing,” Gallagher says. “Nobody else around. And this paper packet rolls by him – a little wrapper. He looks down and it’s a Star Wars wrapper, for the collectible cards, with a blue-and-yellow Darth Vader on the front. Fifteen cents. It hits him in the shoe, he bends over and picks it up. Says, ‘Huh. Guess I’m gonna do okay at this’.”

For Gallagher, working on *Knights of the Old Republic* wasn’t just another job, it was a chance to contribute to the galactic sandbox his hero had helped dream up decades earlier. There was an enormous amount of pressure to get it right. Fortunately McQuarrie had some words of wisdom for the artists at BioWare.

“He didn’t really have to tell me this, but he said, ‘Always push back. Be of service, but let them understand that they need you more than you need them,’” Gallagher remembers. “And he wasn’t being confrontational or gnarly. It was just, ‘Hey, man, you’re an essential voice



1 Concept art for HK-47, one of *KotOR*’s most beloved characters.

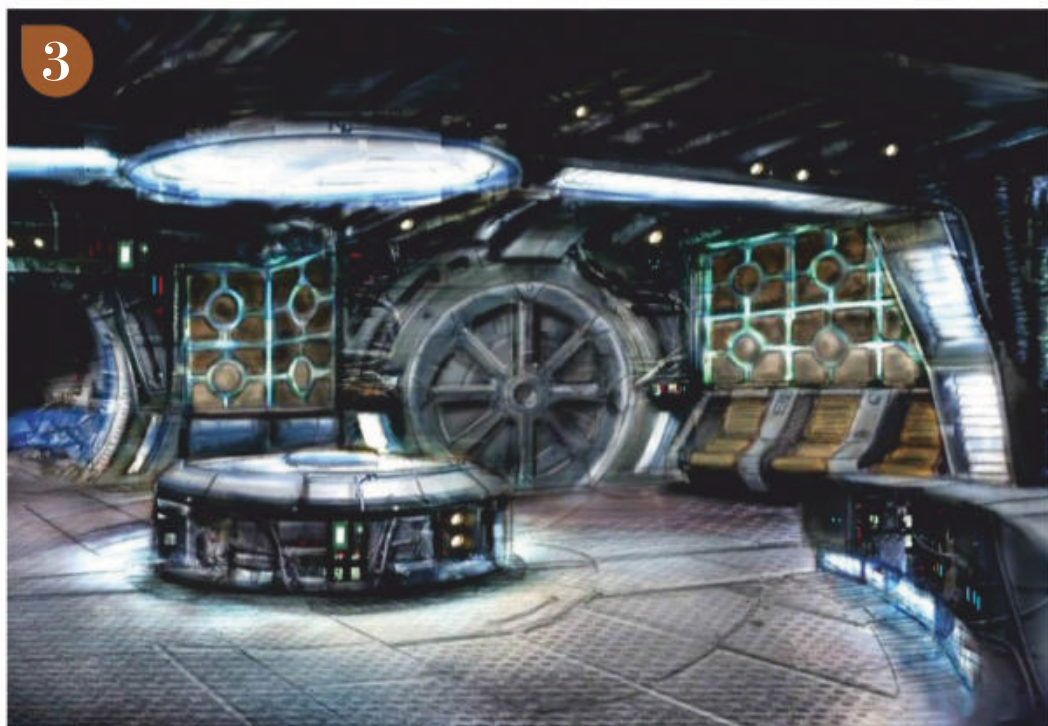
2 A concept illustration of Taris, where your adventure begins.

3 The interior of your ship recalls the similarly shabby *Millennium Falcon*.

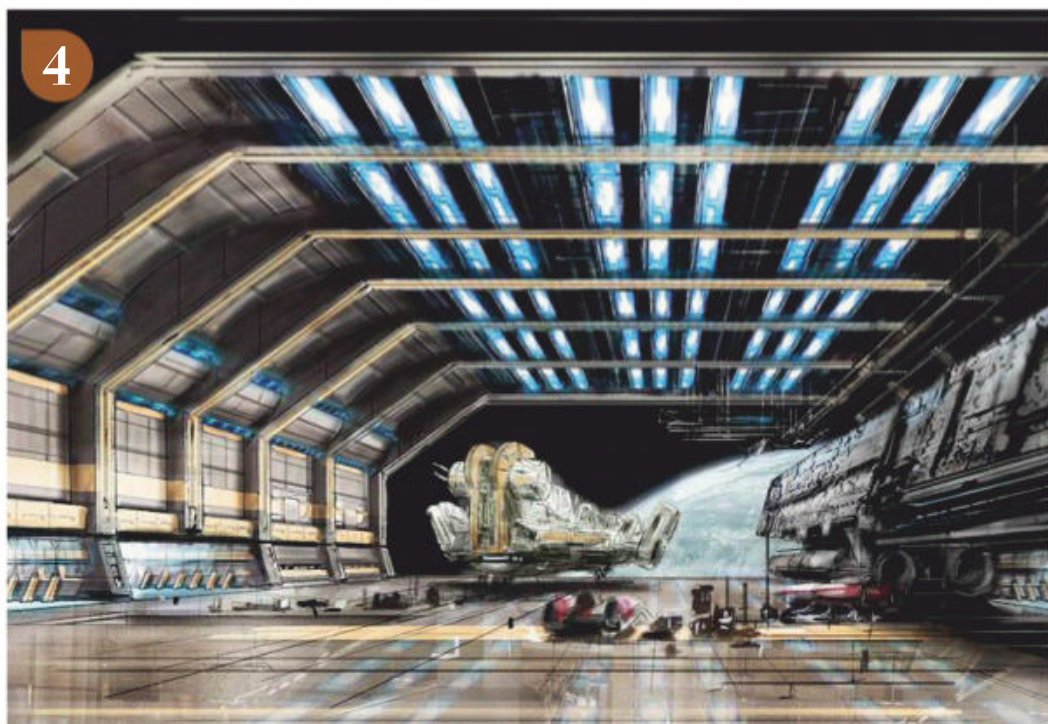
4 This huge hangar is classic Star Wars, illustrating incredible scale



2



3



4

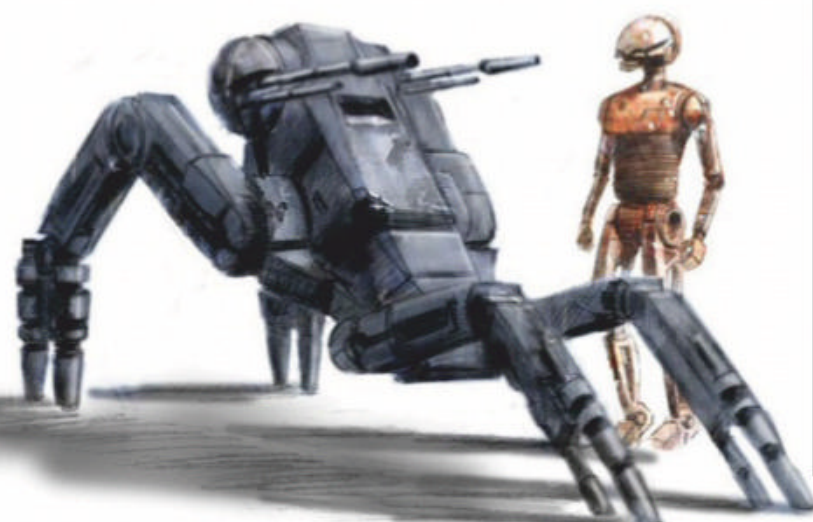
here, and your contribution means a phenomenal amount to the process'. That was his bit of advice for me, anyway – be your own boss, don't take their shit, and you'll be fine." McQuarrie also told them, "Enjoy the process itself."

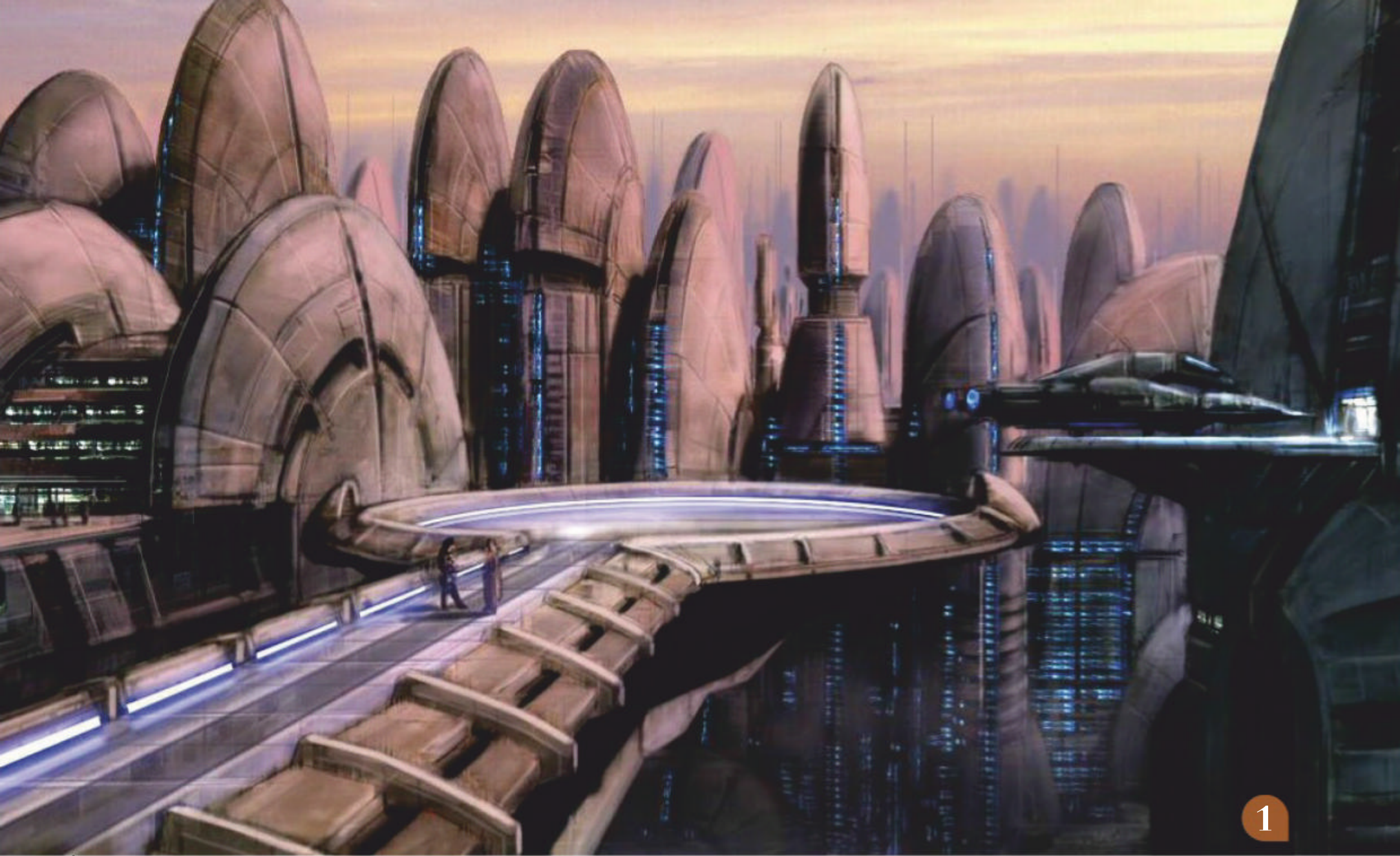
Luckily, Gallagher wasn't left alone to create in a bubble. Every step of the process was a collaboration between BioWare's art, design, and writing teams. No single person was responsible for a given character.

"James [Ohlen] and I had a creative shorthand," Gallagher says, "and we'd finish each other's sentences when it came to design. James would usually just say, 'Well, make somethin' cool!'"

Growing up, Ohlen had served as Dungeon Master for his friends in Grande Prairie, Alberta, and the West End Games Star Wars RPG was a favourite pastime. "I took characters from the campaign I ran, their names and personalities and stuff, and those inspired some of the characters in *Knights of the Old Republic* – Carth, Bastila, Zaalbar, and Mission," he says. "That was a quick source of inspiration. I'd done that with the *Baldur's Gate* series, too, because it takes a long time to create characters sometimes. I would go back to characters that had been developed over years of playing in a role-playing game."

"Naming characters is always one of the hardest things to do," says project director Casey Hudson. "But [the self-exiled Jedi] Jolee Bindo [got his name from] an





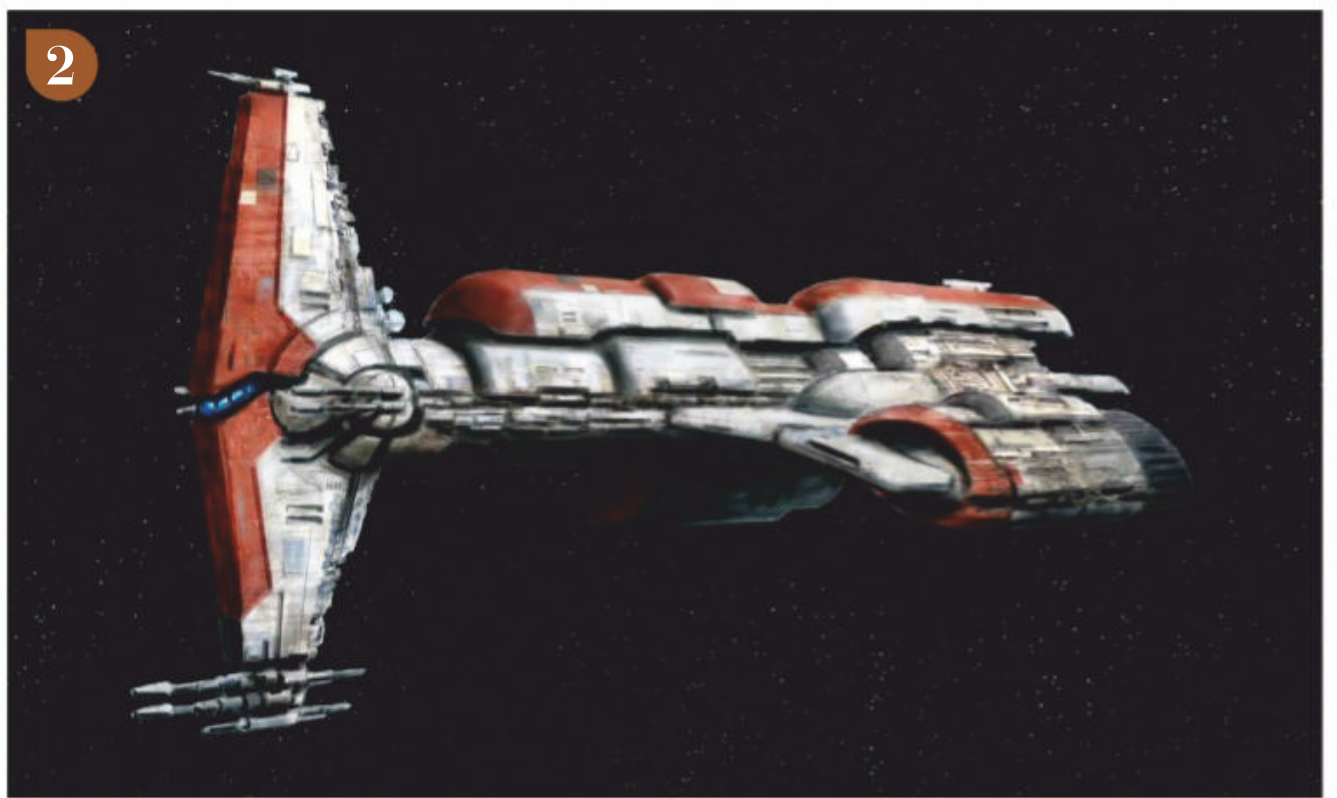
» imaginary friend that I had when I was three years old, that I invented. And I have no idea where that name came from, but it's just one of those that – you know, when you're searching for stuff, you just draw from your background."

The Twi'lek rogue Mission Vao "was originally supposed to be a young male, maybe a teenager or in his early 20s, based on some of the concepts that we had" according to art director Derek Watts. "But we decided to make her female." Even after settling on the character's gender, the team at BioWare continued to push for a design "more like a cute teen and less like the kid from *Terminator 2*" as Watts told *Electronic Gaming Monthly*. "Everyone was fine with the new look except for one of the writers, who thought she was painted up too much. We reminded him that he wrote a line for Mission that said, 'If you don't watch out, you'll have to deal with my furry friend!'"

Ideas usually began with BioWare's core leadership, including Hudson and Ohlen, but developers would often find other ways to incorporate pieces of themselves into the game. One example of this is Pazaak, an in-universe minigame based on blackjack.

"We wanted to have a card game, and I am a frequent visitor to Vegas," says writer Drew Karpysyn. "So I was the one who actually designed the basics of how Pazaak would work, the rules system, and then worked with one of the programmers to implement it into the game." But cardplaying wasn't the only hobby of Karpysyn's that made its way into the project.

"I used to play on a billiards team," he says. "Four of the people on it were named Harrison – several brothers or various relatives. And we were gonna call ourselves the



HK-41s – four Harrisons and one Karpysyn. We said, 'Well, it sounds more like the AK-47 if we call ourselves the HK-47s'. So that was the name of my billiards team when I played in the league. And when they found out I was working on a *Star Wars* game, [my teammates] were like, 'Oh, you have to make a robot called HK-47'."

DESIGN DIFFICULTIES

KotOR players encounter the murderous protocol droid HK-47 in a junk shop on Tatooine. He's remembered fondly as a source of comic relief, as written by designer David Gaider, and also for his menacing, alien design.

For Gallagher, HK-47 was a far less personal affair. "It was a very short conversation," Gallagher says. "James just said 'I need a badass C-3PO'. So all I did was essentially use a bilaterally symmetrical protocol-droid physique, with a little bit of enhancement and a snake head, which



is really the inspiration for the broader, flatter face. And it was a copperhead, as I recall.

“So that’s really the inspiration, he was a copperhead C-3PO. And, of course, his personality is what really carries the day, but his physical personality has to reflect his disposition.” The similarities to C-3PO didn’t stop at the physical. In a nod to the more famous droid’s origin story – that he’d been built by young Anakin Skywalker long before he became Darth Vader – HK-47 is revealed to have been owned by none other than Darth Revan himself.

“I PROBABLY DID 20 ITERATIONS OF EACH CHARACTER, ESSENTIALLY”

Of course, the artists and designers working on the game didn’t always agree with one another, and they weren’t afraid to say so.

One especially contentious character was Darth Malak, the Sith Lord hunting the player throughout the game. At some point, Malak suffered a lightsaber blow to the face – his most striking feature is a metal prosthesis where his lower jaw used to be.

“I gave James shit about [the Malak design],” Gallagher admits. “Because I thought it looked like Mort from Bazooka Joe and His Gang. I was like, ‘What the hell is that? You should just have a turtleneck [covering his mouth]. He got his mandible cut off?’. I was like, ‘For fuck’s sake, James. Really?’”

1 This concept art channels Cloud City from *The Empire Strikes Back*.

2 Concept art for Endar Spire, the capital ship where the tutorial takes place.

3 As well as stats, your character’s clothes are also dictated by class.

“I was outvoted, obviously,” Gallagher remembers. “And I didn’t go away and sulk or anything. I said ‘I’m not gonna design Malak because I think it’s a terrible idea’. I was designing other elements for the game, and there was a shit-ton of stuff to do, so I was just like ‘Derek probably has a good handle on this’. And we ended up with the Malak concept. It doesn’t bother me. It doesn’t insult me. I just don’t think it’s a very well-realised design.”

Malak aside, Gallagher’s fingerprints are all over the art design in the game. He designed the vast

majority of the characters – as well as many costumes, props, and vehicles.

“I probably did 20 iterations of each character, essentially, if you did a head count,” Gallagher says. “As I recall, we were creating by chapter, so the people we meet first in a meaningful way, in terms of story, are the first ones you take a crack at.

“And once you break the neck on the core design, and you’re honouring the Star Wars aesthetic while trying to add your own flourishes in there, then you move forward and cut your teeth on Revan and the Sith. Because it was Star Wars, and we were following the Star Wars methodology, where you offer a multitude of variants on each [character design]. And it’s subtle permutations, where you go ‘Okay, that’s the one’. Or ‘That head combined with those legs, and that works’.

“I was drawing it all up with marker at that point. I wasn’t working digitally, it was too slow. I was just grinding out analog art.” ■



Leif Walter

Creative Assembly's lead designer on **TOTAL WAR: THREE KINGDOMS**. By Johnny Cullen

Leif Walter is in a relaxed state as I speak to him ahead of his appearance on stage to talk *Total War: Three Kingdoms* at EGX Rezzed in London. A fan of *Total War* since before he joined Creative Assembly, he now talks enthusiastically about the series and his work on it. During our conversation, he answers questions about how Creative Assembly decided on ancient China as a setting, how the era manifests in *Three Kingdoms*' design, and what the future might hold for the *Total War* series.

PROFILE



Leif Walter was an outsider to games before he joined Creative Assembly. After leaving university, where he studied maths, he worked at a military research facility. It was from there that he joined CA in 2016. He is now a lead designer for a series that, by his own confession, he's been a fan of since before joining CA.

This is probably the first *Total War* to explore a new era or timeline since *Attila*, with the exception of *Warhammer*. What is it about exploring new eras, new timelines, in the series that excites the development team?

Well, for a *Total War* game, you always look for turbulent and interesting periods of history where there's conflict and drama, maybe an interesting development at a cultural level. And when we first got in touch with the Three Kingdoms period, we realised very quickly that, basically, it was the perfect *Total War* setting. A lot of charismatic characters and leaders with relationships between each other and backstabbing and this kind of drama. Massive armies marching against each other. It's basically the perfect *Total War* setting. You know, there's the massive Han dynasty, the Han empire, which is basically the equivalent of the Roman Empire. And this big empire, crumbling, suffering from internal corruption, engulfed in this big civil war. It was the perfect setting.

For the most part, it's *Game of Thrones* before *Game of Thrones* actually happened?

Yeah, basically! I mean, like I said, there's sort of fake gods and fake armies marching against each other. But mostly there's cool, personal stories between characters and personal feuds, maybe sometimes irrational friendships or irrational rivalries. That would inform gameplay decisions and the directions for the gameplay design. It's pretty clear we need these personal relationships to have an impact on your campaign.

How do you decide on the balance between the story and the game systems? How do you bring those two things together?

It's an interesting balance to strike. We always have the three big pillars between historical accuracy, authenticity, fun, and then of course some interesting gameplay that we

want to bring in. And yeah, sometimes we have to make those sacrifices to increase the fun of both. I would say with *Three Kingdoms*, there's the benefit of having two big sources that allow different factors to that problem. There's Records of the Three Kingdoms for the pure historical period, and then the Romance of the Three Kingdoms novel which delivered all this personal drama. So we have these two big sources we could draw from.

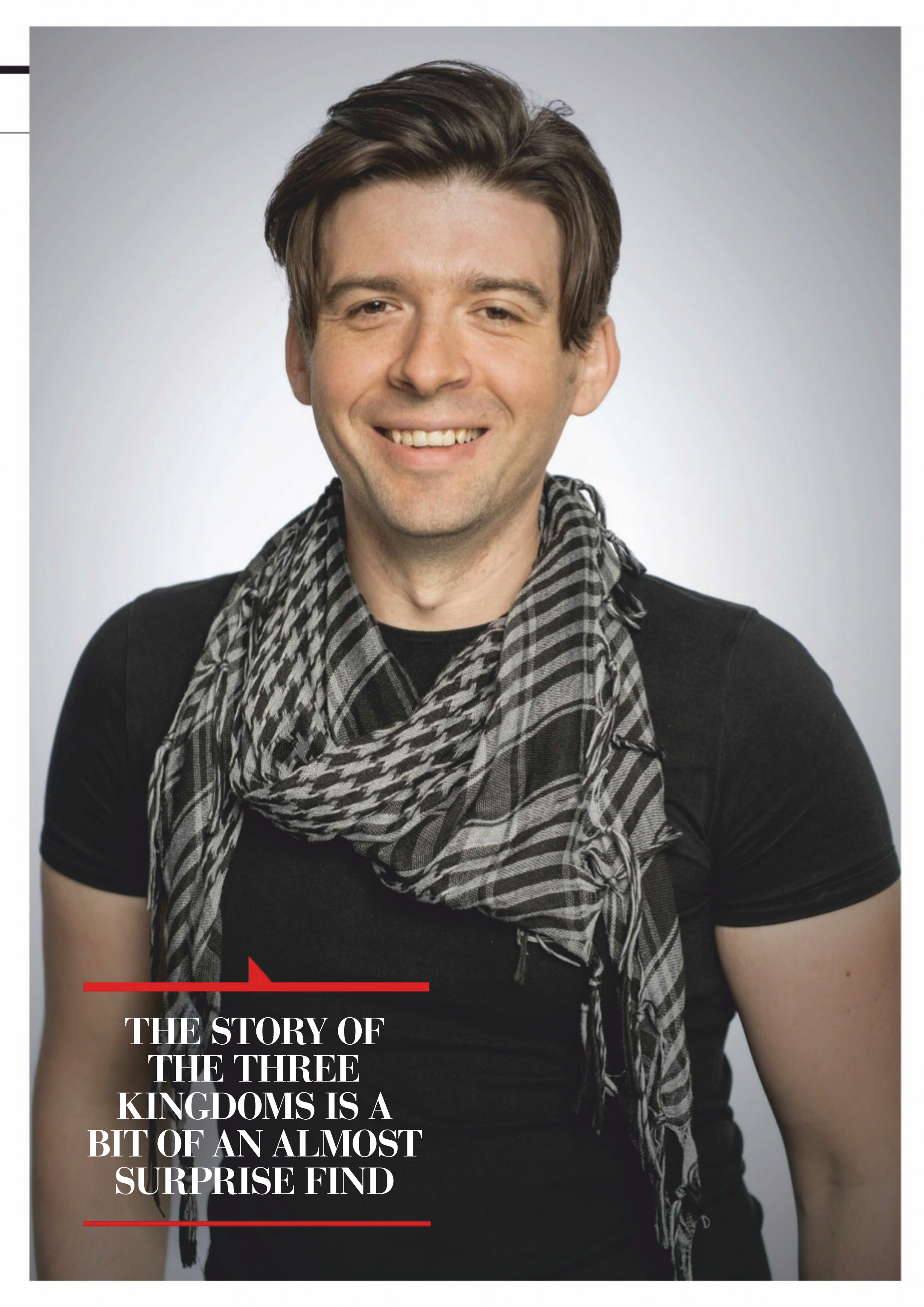
You mentioned it in part in the first question, but what's the creative process like in determining what is the right era or timeline to bring to a *Total War* game? Describe that for me.

I mean obviously we all have sort of an idea of certain historical periods. There's loads of cultural knowledge of certain things like the medieval era, there's knights, and in ancient Japan, samurai. And so the story of the Three Kingdoms is a bit of an almost surprise find because it's not very well known in the west. It has a huge cultural legacy in the east, in China and Japan.

But in the West, it's not very well known, so it was almost like getting

BELOW: "My horse is better than yours!"





**THE STORY OF
THE THREE
KINGDOMS IS A
BIT OF AN ALMOST
SURPRISE FIND**

» sudden inspirations from, say, movies and then you learn more about that period, and then you try to match the historical context with possible gameplay mechanics and how they tie together.

And then sometimes you'll be running through a situation where you feel like certain settings might be cool, but then you learn more about it, and you realise maybe there's not enough cultural richness, not really enough battles, these kinds of things. The Three Kingdoms has both. Like I said, the perfect match.

You mentioned how in the West, it's not as well-known as, say, in China and Japan. So how do you go making that sort of story easy for players to understand, who don't really know that background? Or who just aren't as historically savvy and so don't know the story?

There are two big things about this. First of all, I think from my personal experience, *Total War* games – or any historical game for that matter – are a great vehicle to get players more interested in that kind of time period, so you deliver nice appetisers and then they start to learn a bit more about that period, then they go away from the game and get a history book out. I think this process, that's where *Total War* games can be really cool. A piece of entertainment that's educational.

Secondly, *Total War* is a sandbox game, so for us it's always important to not necessarily tell the story in a narrative, it doesn't have to play out exactly like the Three Kingdoms novel for example.

But what we wanted was to create an environment where players almost create their own Three Kingdoms story. And that's so important. I know Ma Chao ended up

being in Liu Bei's army – being one of his generals – but it's more about creating gameplay systems that allow players to forge their own story and so focus not so much on delivering that detail, but more about enabling players to tell their own stories.

So how accessible have you made the game for newcomers, or for maybe those like me, who have had very light experience with the series? I think I've played only an hour or an hour and a half of *Shogun 2*. So how do you make that accessible for newer players or old players with little experience with the series?

That's one big pillar for us was the concept of gating, so that... *Total War* is a complex tactics game – there's no way around it – there's always going to be that complexity and that's what players are interested in. But what we wanted to achieve was that the game starts off with less systems involved, less things to be aware of, less things to run towards.

So to start off, it's very straightforward, you build armies and take territories. But as you go and you learn more about the game, the game gets increasingly harder, more challenging and more complex.

You just don't want to overburden the player from the start?

Exactly, because what's most important for our fans, we wanted to create a rich *Total War* experience that has a lot of deep mechanics in it. So we didn't want to make it, you know, over-accessible and streamline it too much, but have this journey through the game where you start off not overburdened with thousands of things to manage and then you learn more about the game as you go.

Can you talk about the inclusion of the Romance Mode, because it changes the dynamics of the game and has a different tempo to Records mode. With Records, it's more strategic, but with Romance, everything feels more fast-paced,



ABOVE: The Three Kingdoms era is "a find", according to Walter.

BELOW: *Total War* games are akin to a HBO show, says Walter.





ABOVE: "No, my horse is better than yours."

with a higher tempo, etc. Was that daunting at all to explore, settling on the difference in style and pace between the two modes?

First of all, like I said, we have these two big sources for the game, so it was pretty obvious from the beginning that we want these two perspectives. And like I said, especially in battle, we tell you the difference between [Records], where it's all about how you position your troops and the manoeuvres you perform, and Romance, where you almost have an additional tactical layer on top.

[In Romance], you have your army interactions, and then your heroes and how they interact with the enemy heroes. So it's a cool interesting additional layer and sort of fits the over-arching mechanics of battles to keep the tempo a bit up because you want a fast pace to move the heroes to another area, trigger an ability, leave an impact there, then move somewhere else. So you have a faster interaction with the game.

The *Total War* series has visited so many eras and timelines, from *Shogun* to *Rome* and even *Warhammer*. And it feels like each setting brings a different size and scope, especially with the launch of the *Total War Saga* series. What is it about the series that makes it so consistent, even as the setting changes? What is it that keeps it fresh for players?

Like I said, *Total War* games are a very evocative sandbox for a historical environment. Especially for me, I was a *Total War* player before I joined Creative Assembly.

And for me, it was always to play the same pattern where I had this narrative in my head. I started with *Rome: Total War* and there you have your generals with

their trades, and you tie everything together with a backstory about your generals, and it's all embedded in this historical context. So it's almost like watching, like you said earlier, *Game of Thrones*, or a historical series like the *Rome* HBO series, and I think it's just a very nice journey for players. That's what they appreciate, and then the different settings deliver a different flavour.

Quality wise, of course, CA are passionate developers who want to deliver high quality content, and we always try to be better next project, learn from our mistakes and try to make the best historical game possible.

What can CA do in the future to keep that consistency going for the series for the next five, ten, twenty years? Assuming we can all look forward to that sort of vision in the future...

I mean, *Total War*, that's large battles, and historical settings and environments, and trying to achieve it in this game. That's the formula...

Now there are many more exciting historical periods to explore, we also listen to what our fans are asking for in some of the titles. So yeah, there's a lot of amazing content to explore, and mechanic wise, I think we'll always push the *Total War* formula and make it more engaging and tell even grander stories to players, enable them to tell their own stories. There's exciting stuff to look forward to. ■

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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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Summer break

It's summer, and that means the major publishers have settled into their annual hibernation. It's fine – we'll let them sleep – because instead we get to fill our issues with interesting curios and indie delights. We kick things off with Andy's review of *Observation*, a tense sci-fi mystery from the creators of the eerie *Untold Stories*.

We've also got the absolutely charming *Outer Wilds* – not to be confused with Obsidian's upcoming *The Outer Worlds*. It's a game about exploring a small, dying solar system that's packed with more mystery than you can see before the sun blows up. Luckily, you're trapped in a time loop, meaning you get to try again and again.

And if the above sounds too contemplative for you, *Mordhau* should suit your murderous needs.

Phil Savage

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EDITOR

phil.savage@futurenet.com

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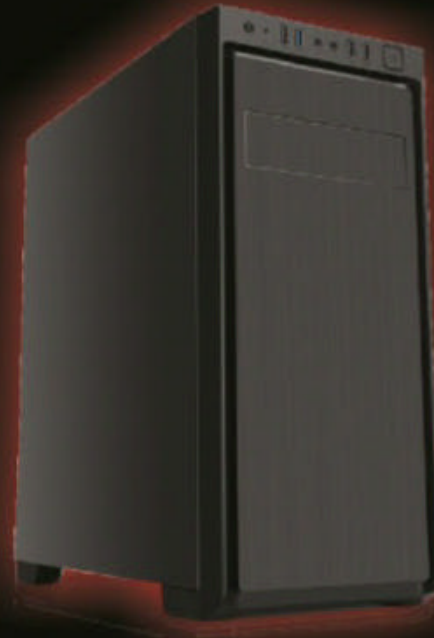
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SYSTEM CRITICAL

An astronaut and a self-aware artificial intelligence form an uneasy alliance in **OBSERVATION**. By Andy Kelly

The space station *Observation* has broken away from its Earth orbit and is drifting somewhere near Saturn. Its systems are malfunctioning, a fire has broken out, and the on-board artificial intelligence, SAM, is acting strangely. Things are not looking good for Dr Emma Fisher, the reluctant hero of this sci-fi thriller from the studio behind *Stories Untold*.

But what's interesting about *Observation* is that you don't play as Fisher, but SAM. The station is an extension of you, and its cameras are your eyes and ears. You can, when asked, open doors, cycle airlocks, assess damage, and all manner of functional duties. But something seems to have awoken in you. A flicker of self-awareness, perhaps. And an ominous command from an unknown party has infiltrated your code: BRING HER.

The *Observation* is reminiscent of the International Space Station – a strangely low-tech warren of claustrophobic corridors with no up or down, littered with laptops, science equipment and the personal effects of the crew. Who, by the way, are also missing. There's a powerful sense throughout that, until very recently, this place was bustling with life. Fisher is alone, but as she floats

through the station in zero gravity there are echoes of the vanished crew all around her.

Fisher is justifiably distressed by the discovery that she has somehow, inexplicably, ended up almost 900 million miles from where she's

supposed to be. But she's also a trained astronaut and immediately sets to work repairing the stricken station – with your help. At any time you can pull up a schematic of the *Observation* and jump

between stationary cameras, panning and zooming and scanning for objects of interest. The game is largely silent except for the ambient rumble of the station and the whirring and clicking of these cameras, which is enormously atmospheric.

GRAIN STATION

Observation also makes subtle use of video effects, with simulated

It also reinforces the idea that you're playing as a machine

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No Code

PUBLISHER

Devolver Digital

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MULTIPLAYER

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interference, grain, and distortion giving the image a tactile, analogue quality. This along with the grounded realism of the station, as well as some beautifully natural lighting, makes for a remarkable looking videogame. It also reinforces the idea that you're playing as a machine, viewing the world through a lens, and that the technology wired through the wounded station is as fallible as anything else. This feeling of being at the mercy of technology, with only a thin layer of aluminium between you and an endless cosmic void, makes for a palpably tense game.

When you've located something Fisher is looking for with one of your cameras – a damaged module, perhaps, or the source of a fire – you can respond to her request. SAM will answer in the kind of calm, reassuring, but also slightly unsettling voice so beloved by sci-fi AI. She will also ask you to unlock jammed doors, recover data from laptops, and reboot systems, including re-establishing communications with Earth and activating a tracker that will, in theory, locate the missing crew.

SAM isn't always confined to the *Observation*'s network of cameras. In some parts of the game you can possess guidance spheres – little orb-shaped drones that allow you to fly freely around the station, interacting with things the same way you can with the cameras. Flying takes a bit of getting used to, particularly when it comes to orienting yourself in a place where up and down is an outdated concept. But the spheres are the best way to explore the station, poking around for hidden documents and audio logs that will help fill in some of the blanks of the game's enigmatic story.

And it's a place worth exploring. The *Observation* is made up of four sections: Salyut 10, the Russian arm; Horizon, the European and American arm; Shenzhou XII, the Chinese arm; and Universal, a central hub shared by the entire crew. Each section of the station has its own distinctive

SPACE JOCKEYS *Key members of the Observation crew*



EMMA FISHER

Born: March 3, 1992
Birthplace: Cardiff, Wales
A resourceful scientist who develops and maintains the *Observation*'s guidance spheres: camera-equipped drones SAM can use to move around the station.



JIM ELIAS

Born: October 30, 1971
Birthplace: Glasgow, Scotland
The captain of the *Observation* is a veteran astronaut who served aboard the ISS. Yet, despite his experience, something about this mission is unsettling him.



AILSAL YANG

Born: June 23, 1998
Birthplace: Hangzhou, China
In this vision of the near future, climate change is worse than ever. Yang has been assigned to the *Observation* to study Earth and track changes in the atmosphere.



STANISLAV LEONOV

Born: December 12, 1970
Birthplace: Vladivostok, Russia
The *Observation*'s technical officer is increasingly concerned about the functionality of the station, and seems to think corners have been cut in its construction.



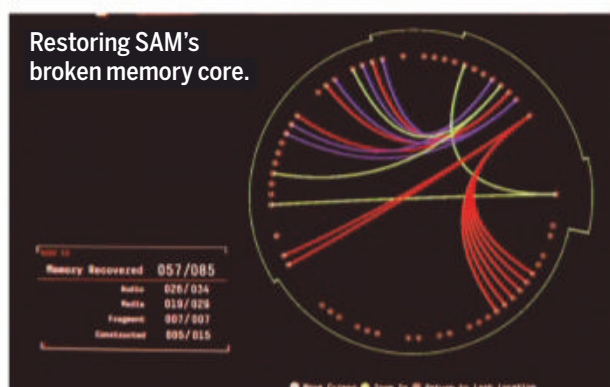
Fisher introduces SAM to the guidance spheres.



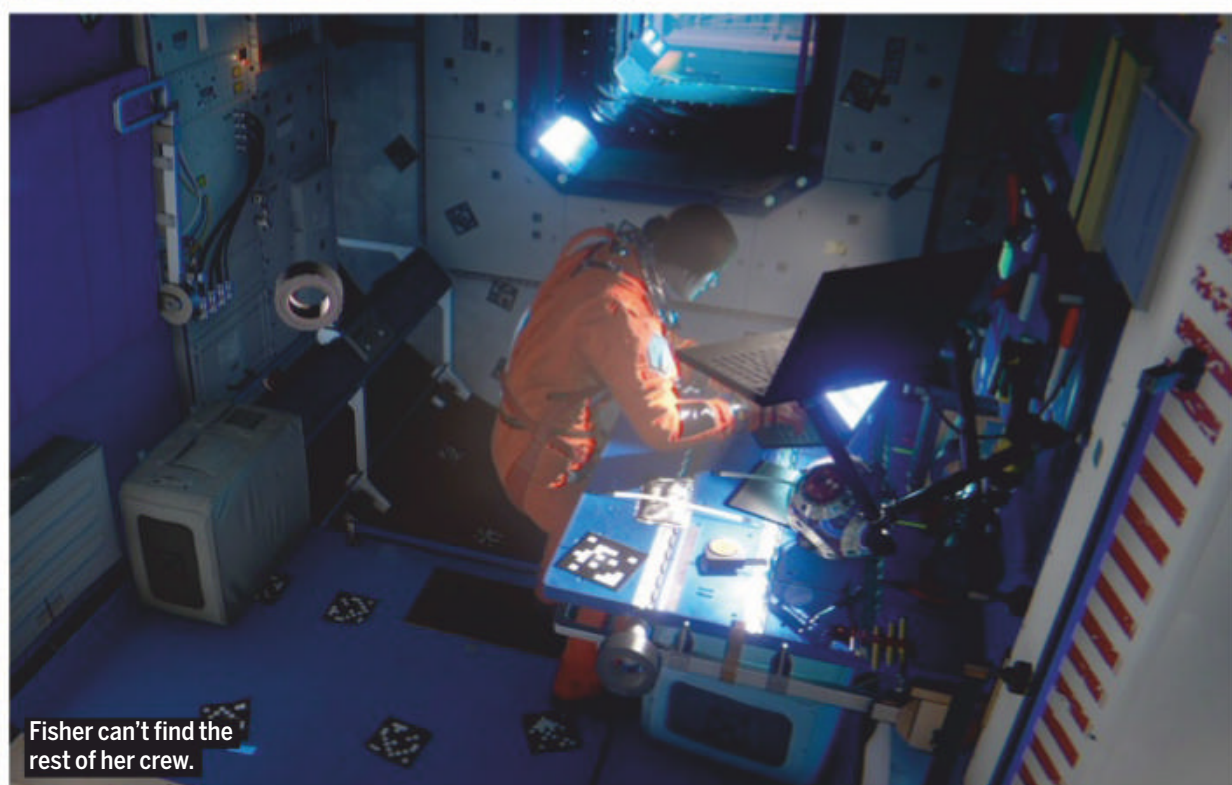
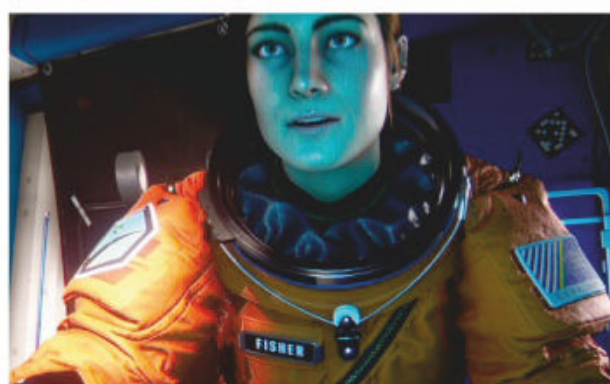
You can't help but feel like a voyeur.



Fisher waits patiently for SAM to open a door.

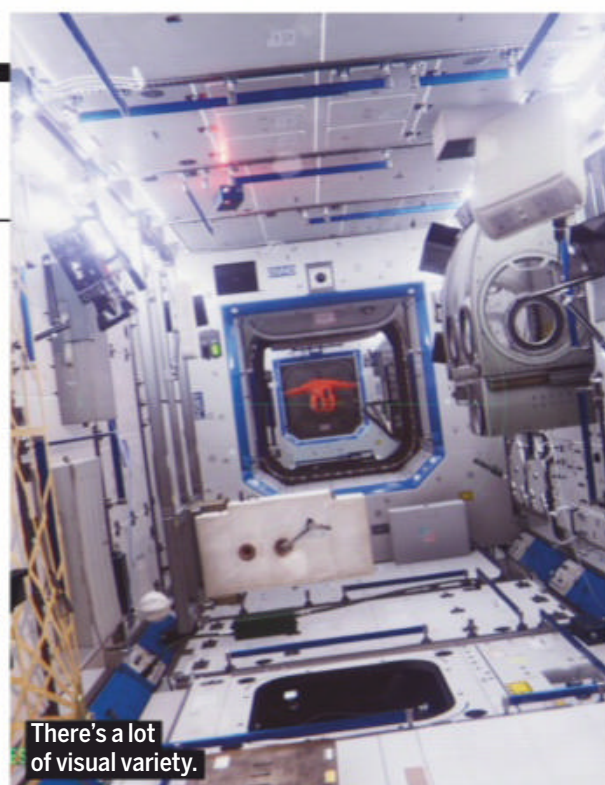


Restoring SAM's broken memory core.



Fisher can't find the rest of her crew.

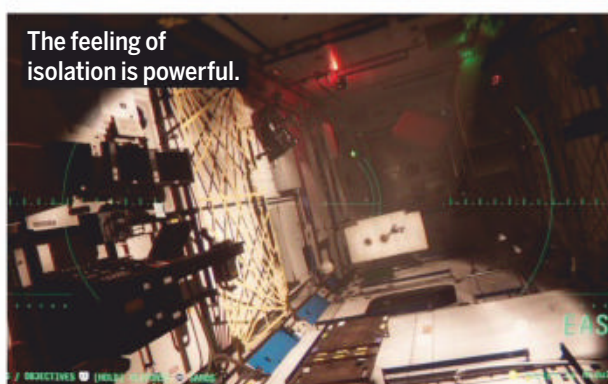
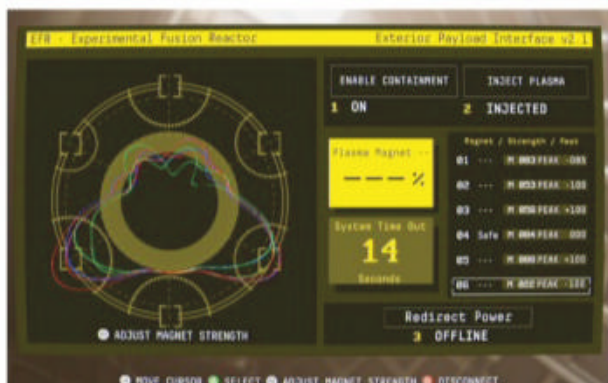
The video effects are incredibly stylish.



There's a lot of visual variety.



Fisher leaves the relative safety of the station.



The feeling of isolation is powerful.



You can never have too many spare spacesuits.

» aesthetic, atmosphere, and personality, reflecting both the nations that built them and the people who live and work there. The station is extremely detailed, from the intricately designed computers and machines that keep it running, down to pens and rolls of tape tethered to people's workspaces.

Finding a problem is one thing, but to fix something that's broken – such as the experimental fusion reactor powering the station – you often have to dive in and get your circuits dirty. The station is governed by a series of complex computer systems that are beyond even Fisher's considerable talents, leaving SAM to make sense of them. Here the puzzle-solving aspect of the game emerges as you attempt to untangle these systems, and more than once I found myself reaching for a pen and paper. It was a little jarring, I must admit, playing as a supercomputer but still having to use a notepad to make up for the limitations of my stupid organic brain.

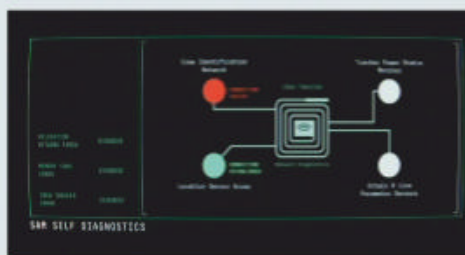
Each puzzle is represented by a wonderfully stylised interface, with the kind of hard-edged, functional design you'd expect from something that was only ever meant to be accessed by a machine. Tasks include adjusting a magnetic field in the aforementioned fusion reactor, running diagnostics on your own damaged memory core, fixing the clamps that hold the station together, and rebooting a faulty cooling system. And all of these jobs have their own unique interface and means of interaction, rooted in smart, well-designed puzzles that are immensely satisfying to solve.

Many of them involve referencing schematics or diagrams which are usually found pinned to walls or hidden on laptops. Other solutions I uncovered more instinctively, prodding at a particular system's sliders, buttons, and other sci-fi doohickeys until it started to make sense. The sheer variety of puzzles in *Observation* is impressive – both in terms of how you interact with them and their visual design. As a puzzle game it offers a fairly stiff challenge, but nothing that will truly stump you.

The only real struggle I had was getting lost in the maze-like station while controlling the spheres – at least until I discovered a waypoint system that, when you choose a module on the map, leads you right there. I also noticed while floating



MACHINE LEARNING *Problems SAM has to deal with*



NETWORK PROBLEMS

One of SAM's earliest jobs is checking the station's network. The crew ID system is down, making finding the astronauts tricky.



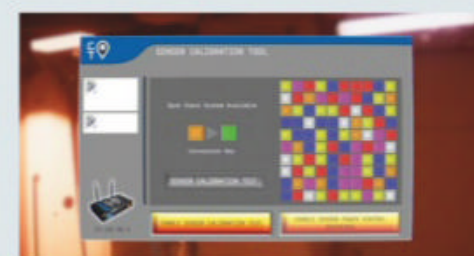
STRUCTURAL FAILURE

Some of the clamps connecting the station's modules have been shaken loose. SAM has to leave the station and re-attach them.



STATION ALERTS

SAM can see everything that's wrong with the station and will be expected to deal with them before they get out of hand.



ASTRONOMY DATA

If a crew member needs the coordinates of a specific planet or other celestial body, SAM can reference field images to locate them.

around in an aimless daze that the game, correctly guessing I was lost, automatically set a waypoint for me. In general, however, *Observation* leaves you to your own devices, rarely revealing much about where to go next or how to solve a particular problem. You can ask Fisher to repeat her last command, but a lot of the time this acts more like a cryptic clue or a subtle hint than an explicit instruction.

The sheer variety of puzzles in *Observation* is impressive

SCIENCE FICTION

Observation's other great strength is its story. The influence of 2001: A Space Odyssey is obvious, but not in the way I expected. SAM's rebellion and flutters of self-awareness are not as sinister or obvious as HAL's. Instead, it's in the restraint of the narrative where I felt the strongest echoes of Kubrick's austere sci-fi epic. *Observation's* plot is incredibly compelling, with a fascinating, mind-bending sense of mystery that kept me hooked from beginning to end. But it never spells anything out, encouraging you to observe, and ask questions as the story unfolds.

You can fatten your understanding of the plot up with those optional audio logs and documents, but even then a lot of it is left to your

imagination. My only gripe is that I never really felt like SAM was experiencing any kind of moral conflict, or that he was actively battling the forces invading his programming. In fact, he's not much of a character at all. Fisher is the

heart and soul of the game, and I felt more connected to her. But the important thing is that, long after I finished *Observation*, I was still thinking about it – the mark, for me, of any great sci-fi story.

I was relieved, and pleasantly surprised, to discover that *Observation* wasn't just another horror game set in space. It has the measured pacing, knife-edge tension, and twisting narrative of a great thriller. It's scary, but only under the surface, quietly eating away at your nerves rather than shocking them. And it's the best kind of science fiction – exciting and entertaining, but also making you think about humanity's place in the cosmos and the deeper mysteries of universe. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

A stylish, understated, and subtly chilling psychological thriller with a compelling mystery at its core.

82

GRRR-EIGHT

Neo-retro JRPG **OCTOPATH TRAVELER** is frustratingly close to something special. *By Chris Schilling*

What's new is old again. The trademarked 'HD-2D' art style of Acquire's likeable JRPG tips its hat to its publisher's rich genre history while acknowledging technical advancements since Square's 16-bit golden age. Combining pixel art with contemporary effects is a distinctive look. As a fusion of past and present, it works very well... up to a point. And, well, I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this.

Octopath Traveler's main hook isn't entirely new. The idea of a multi-stranded tale with several protagonists harks back to *Dragon Quest IV*, though that had five heroes rather than eight, and managed to tie its narrative threads together more effectively. This is more like eight different stories that occasionally – and awkwardly – cross paths.

However, here you can choose who to begin your adventure with, whether it's a thief chasing a rare treasure, an ageing sellsword looking for a face from his past or a homebody merchant who's simply seeking adventure. Each has an individual skill that can be used in interactions outside battle: hunter H'aanit can goad NPCs blocking your path into fights, while axe-wielding apothecary Alwyn uses his friendly demeanour to coax useful information out of villagers. For some characters, it amounts to little more than pressing another button rather

than 'talk', but others involve an element of chance. The light-fingered Therion can pickpocket valuable kit, but if he's caught then the locals will no longer trust you. Though since this can be reversed, it's usually worth the risk.

You'll play through the first chapter of your chosen protagonist's story, before heading out into the wider world to recruit the others to add to your party – after playing the first chapter of

On paper this approach promises more flexibility than you really get

theirs. On paper this approach promises more flexibility than you really get. Once you've made your choice, you'll inevitably follow one of two routes to the closest allies, and from there your path is all but determined. To get through the toughest challenges, you'll need everyone up to speed, so you can't realistically pick and choose whose stories you follow. And after a while the recommended levels for each area – to which it's wise to pay heed – only narrow your approach further.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A JRPG that's old-fashioned and forward-thinking all at once

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Acquire

PUBLISHER
Square Enix

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i3-8350K
CPU, 8GB RAM, GeForce
GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
square-enix-games.com/en_US/games/octopath-traveler

Still, eight characters make encounters thrillingly versatile. Again, it's a blend of familiar ideas made to feel fresh. As in the Square-published *Bravely Default* games, you can save up attacks for future turns, making them much more potent. And similar to the *Shin Megami Tensei* games, it's all about finding individual weaknesses and exploiting them to 'break' your opponent. Each one you face has a number of shield points, and once that's whittled down to zero, they'll be stunned, letting you line up devastating combinations when their defences are down.

Although some of these fights drag on a bit – and one or two in the late game can only really be beaten by using very particular strategies – this is where *Octopath Traveler* is at its best. Your characters retain their chibi style even in battle, while these enemies grow to towering stature.

TENTACLES

Over time, it grows into the kind of JRPG where you can happily spend hours tooling around with the diverse range of skills and supporting abilities you earn from different jobs. Characters can assume secondary roles which play up their strengths or cover their flaws. Halving SP consumption for your most powerful spellcaster is a no-brainer, while the 'insult to injury' support skill means status ailments last an extra turn.

It's a pity your party only really becomes a team on the battlefield. Outside it, the characters rarely feel connected, while potential conflicts are also conveniently ignored. *Octopath Traveler* gives us reason to care about the eight protagonists as individuals, but in failing to bring their stories together, it falls short of the classics that inspired it. ■

PROTAG YOURSELF Which hero should you pick?



OLBERIC

Role: Warrior

Choose him if: You're relatively new to JRPGs. The former knight's physical power makes him a strong starter.



H'AANIT

Role: Hunter

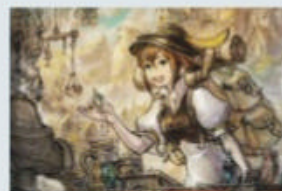
Choose her if: Thou canst toleraten olde worlde dialogue, and fancy summoning creatures to battle for you.



CYRUS

Role: Scholar

Choose him if: You're more about spells than swords. Cyrus' powerful elemental magic belies his genteel nature.



TRESSA

Role: Merchant

Choose her if: You like happy-go-lucky heroes and bargains: Tressa gets store discounts and earns more from battles.

PC GAMER

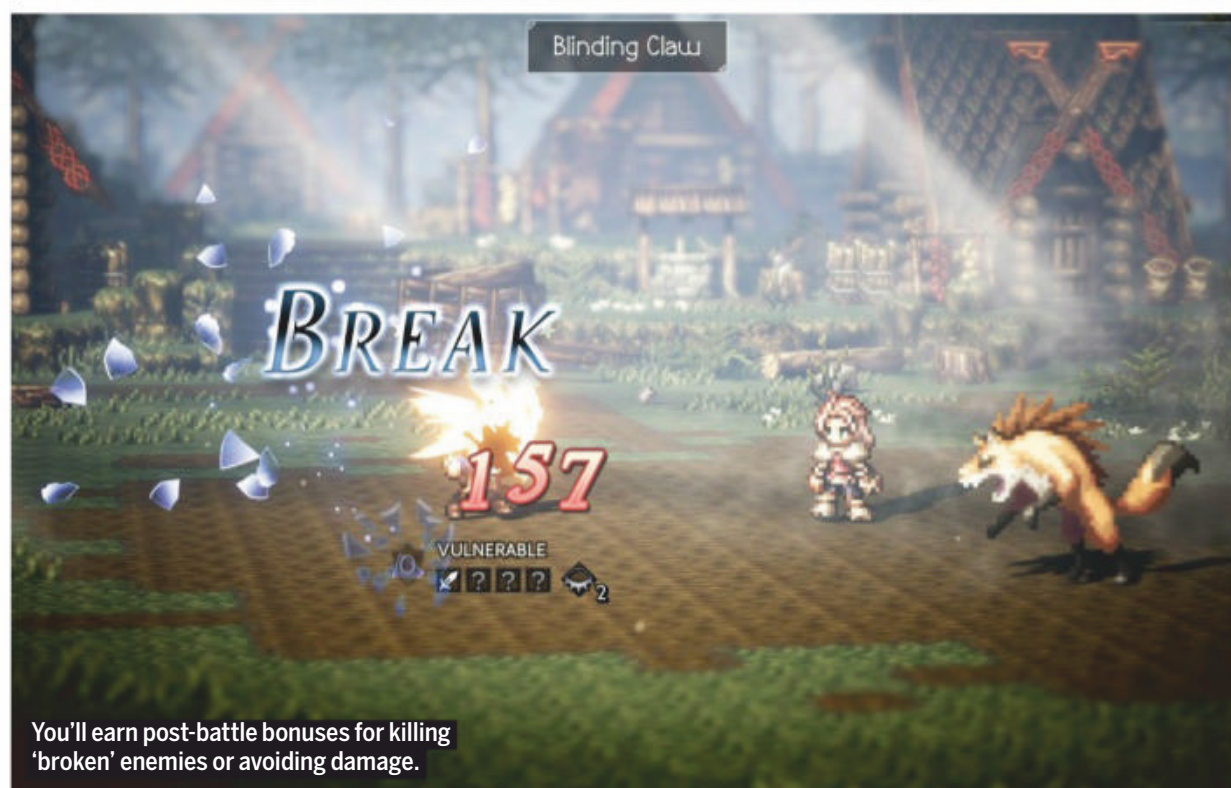
VERDICT

Never quite the sum of its parts, *Octopath Traveler* is a game with brilliant moments rather than a brilliant game.

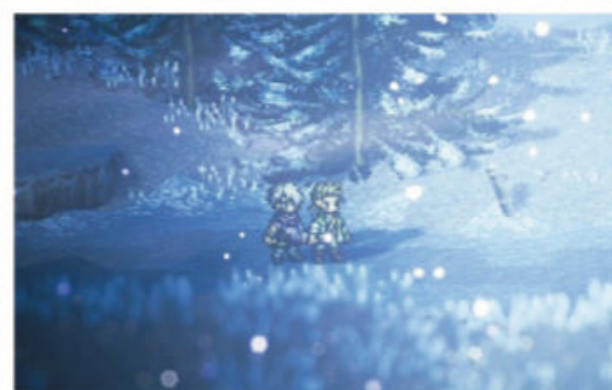
76



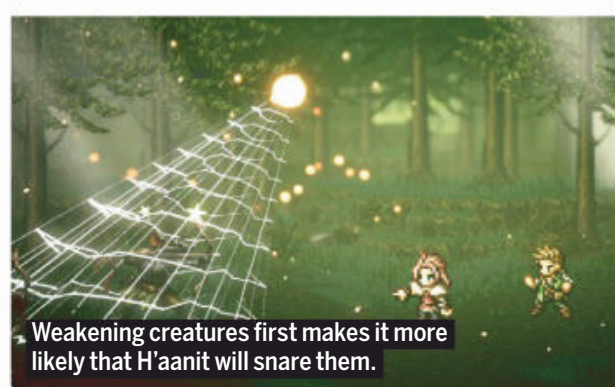
You're given warning of a boss's best moves, letting you prepare accordingly.



You'll earn post-battle bonuses for killing 'broken' enemies or avoiding damage.



Cutscenes are fully skippable if you'd rather focus on battling.



Weakening creatures first makes it more likely that H'aanit will snare them.



Yasunori Nishiki's gorgeous score makes the wintry Frostlands feel magical.

SOLAR FLAIR

OUTER WILDS is the next great mystery game. *By Phil Savage*

The sun has gone supernova. That's bad and all, but right now I'm actually more interested in some rocks. You see, I found a physics-defying obelisk that emits a specific, eerie noise. I wake up, jump in my ship, and use my signalscope to scan the solar system for matching sounds. I follow one to the planet of Brittle Hollow, but almost immediately get distracted by some ruins. I land nearby and investigate. And then the sun blows up again.

I wake up, jump in my ship, and activate its log. A new entry appears for the ruins. There are rumours of other possible points of interest too. I'm trapped in a time loop. I've got about 22 minutes until the sun explodes once again. What can I discover this time?

Superficially, *Outer Wilds* is a first-person game in which you explore a small solar system containing a handful of quirky planets full of weird and interesting phenomena. You fly to a planet, you look at some stuff, you die. You fly to a different planet, you look at some different stuff, you die. Maybe you die because you got lost in a labyrinthine cave system and your suit ran out of oxygen. Maybe you die because your ship's autopilot isn't very clever and sometimes tries to fly you through the sun. Maybe you die because your 22 minutes is up. However it happens, you wake up

back at the start, ready to find something new.

But *Outer Wilds* is more than just a game about looking at strange planets. It's a sandbox of mysteries. It reminds me of *Her Story* or *Return of the Obra Dinn*, in that its solar system feels like a puzzle that I piece together by connecting small, often seemingly unrelated details until they reveal a larger truth.

You start each loop on your home planet of Timber Hearth. You're the latest astronaut for Outer Wilds Ventures – think NASA by way of the National Park Service. Their folksy aesthetic fits perfectly in a solar system where the distance between planets is measured in kilometres and the only inhabited settlement is a tiny village built into a crater. That charm is carried into your journey, too, from the design and handling of your spaceship, which is hardy enough to

I've got about 22 minutes until the sun explodes once again

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A spacefaring explore-'em-up set in the final minutes of a dying solar system

EXPECT TO PAY

£20

DEVELOPER

Mobius Digital

PUBLISHER

Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON

GeForce GTX 1070, 16GB RAM, i5-6600k

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

www.outerwilds.com



absorb a few rough landings, to the way you refill your air supply by standing near some trees.

There are a handful of Hearthian astronauts scattered around the system already – you can go and meet up with them if you like – but they're all content simply sitting by their campfires, cooking marshmallows and playing a jaunty tune on their favoured instrument. You, on the other hand, have been given a device that lets you translate the language of the Nomai – an ancient, technologically advanced species. You're sent out on a journey of discovery, and quickly realise there's much to unravel.

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

Much of your time is spent looking for fragments of text, which the Nomai write directly onto walls and stone tablets in large spirals that unfold out into full conversations. Each text fragment is delivered concisely, but the conversational structure of their writing allows each individual's personality to shine through. Their hopes, fears and relationships are slowly revealed the more time you spend uncovering their past. Almost without realising it, I started to recognise and empathise with specific characters through the way they interacted with their

WILD AT HEART *A guide to the planets*



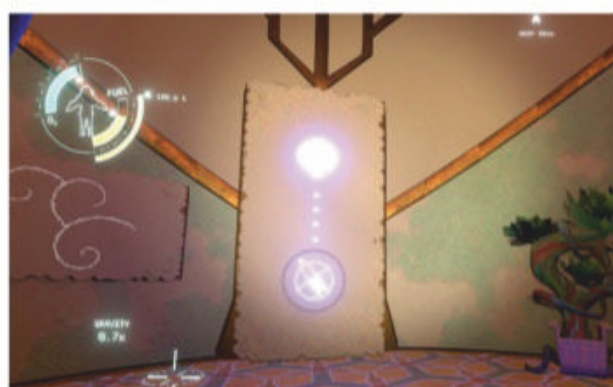
Be careful jumping on low gravity planets.



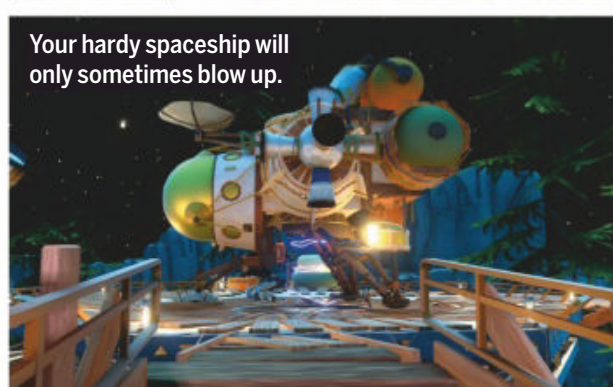
Sun blowing up? Worry about that later.



Things don't go well for the Nomai.



Your hardy spaceship will only sometimes blow up.



Space is pretty when you're not dying.

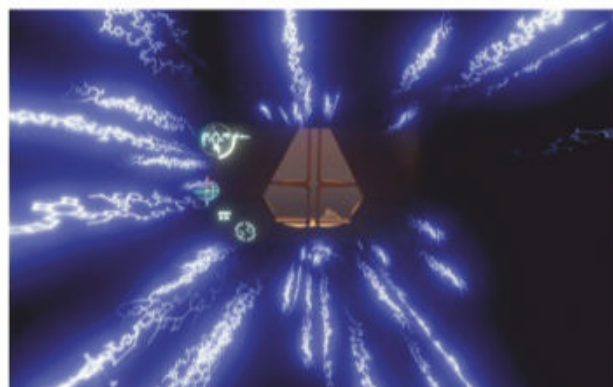
You can only see deadly ghost matter through cameras.



The observatory hints at the universe's mysteries.



Can a scientist explain to me how this even works?



Another campfire. This one's on the moon!



Not all planets are welcoming.

colleagues and friends. It's clear that a tragedy befell the Nomai – you can see their skeletons littering each ruin – but, when I finally uncovered that mystery, I was surprised by how much I cared.

The slow drip feed of information, and the story contained within, is precisely why it's so easy to set the greater mysteries to one side. The death of the sun and the fact that you're seemingly the only person experiencing a time loop both feel like big, distant problems. But there are plenty of smaller threads to follow. Perhaps you land at a site simply because it looks interesting, and translate a note that mentions some other location. Later, you go looking for it, only to find that the entrance is blocked. You put that thread to one side – every discovery is stored on your computer for future reference – and go looking for something else. Then, many loops later, maybe on another planet entirely, an offhand reference causes inspiration to strike. “If this works like that, then maybe...” And suddenly you're back on the case.

The time loop might feel like a gimmick, but it's



SAFETY NOT GUARANTEED

Look, landing can be difficult, OK?



- ✓ Engage autopilot
- ✓ Cross fingers that the autopilot doesn't fling you into the sun
- ✓ Arrive at planet
- ✓ Manually and awkwardly fly-hover around, looking for something interesting
- ✓ Attempt to land, usually diagonally
- ✓ Bump on some trees. Or rocks. Or the ground
- ✓ Break your headlights
- ✓ You've landed!

central to *Outer Wilds*' thesis of exploration. It lets the planets act like living environments that can change over time. The Hourglass Twins, for instance, are two planets connected by a giant column of sand. Over the course of the loop, the sand is transferred from Ash Twin to Ember Twin, filling in the canyons of one while revealing what hides under the surface of another. Each planet has something that makes it an immediately interesting space to explore, and often one that rewards repeat visits at different times throughout your loop.

More importantly, *Outer Wilds* understands that if everything physical resets, then what truly matters is the only thing that can be carried between loops – information. You can be confident that you won't need to go on some convoluted, multi-part quest, gathering multiple doohickeys to perform intricate operations across the solar system. There simply isn't time. While unlocking some of the biggest mysteries requires a bit of planet hopping, it's always designed to fit within its fixed timeframe.

It helps that, when the sun's not blowing up, *Outer Wilds* is a nice place to potter around in. There are dangers, sure – one planet in particular ups the tension to an almost unbearable degree. But elsewhere, whether it's poking about in the remote corner of a planet, or just taking in the spectacle of the solar system from a distance, the expressive, characterful artstyle and jaunty soundtrack – a mix of acoustics and synths that blends Hearthian personality with the promise of sci-fi revelations – make for a pleasant, welcoming space.

It's also an efficient sandbox. The small planets with their almost comically extreme curvature are clearly designed and curated with discovery in mind. Wherever you land, you're always close to *something*. And, fortunately, even basic traversal can feel joyfully expressive. Your suit has a jetpack equipped, meaning it's pretty easy to navigate the surface of a planet – usually, at least. Again, each planet is slightly different. The Hourglass Twins, which are particularly small, have about half the gravity of your home planet. As long as you've got

enough fuel for your jetpack, you can easily jump from one hemisphere to the other, and – if you're feeling particularly brave – even from one Twin to the other. Giant's Deep, meanwhile, has twice your home

Giant's Deep, meanwhile, has twice your home planet's gravity

planet's gravity, making extended jetpack flight practically impossible. While that can lead to frustration in places – particularly when you're low on oxygen and need to make a quick retreat back to

your ship – it's for the better that every location feels so distinct.

OUTER LIMITS

Exploration works best when it's just you and the things that you're discovering. If *Outer Wilds* falls down, it's in conversations with your fellow Hearthians. The dialogue trees feel limited to the point that many don't update after you've discovered you're in a time loop. I'm not saying I should be able to respond to the question of how I feel about my first flight with something as specific as “I just died trying to navigate through a thick patch of cactus on the off chance there was something at the other end”, but it'd be nice to have more than just the same two options I had right at the start.

I also need to call out one specific late-game mystery for being slightly too obtuse. I'd gathered the clues and interpreted them correctly, but my execution turned out to be flawed. My problem became the lack of any reinforcement that I was on the right track – something that elsewhere *Outer Wilds* had often provided in a way that felt natural and unpatronising. With no hint that my instincts were correct, I instead started to chase more convoluted solutions, rather than refining my actions in the correct place.

Still, if *Outer Wilds* isn't as perfectly tight as *Return of the Obra Dinn* et al, it's because its interactions are broader, more interactive and often more surprising in their slowburn revelation. It's a mystery that spans multiple worlds, after all, and untangling it is a delight. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Beneath its charming, inventive and beautiful worlds, *Outer Wilds* hides a cleverly unfolding mystery.

89

UNWELL

The grim reaper reigns supreme in the glum streets of **PATHOLOGIC 2**. By Tom Senior

After years away you have returned home to your village in response to an urgent letter from your father. Three men try to kill you the moment you step off the train. The town instantly knows about this and blames you for some other recent murders. To top it all off you're also quickly dying of hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and blood loss. That's just day one in this strange, gruelling survival game.

Pathologic 2 is "supposed to be almost unbearable" according to devs Ice Pick Lodge, who created the obtuse, near-unplayable original *Pathologic*, and purgatorial horror game *The Void*. *Pathologic 2* challenges you to survive 12 in-game days in a town that's going completely to shit. Disease, paranoia, mob justice, and paranormal happenings unfold in real time as you plod through brown, foggy districts, invading people's houses for scraps and occasionally meeting important figures – a mob boss, a childhood friend, faction leaders for bands of roaming children.

It's a deliberately exhausting experience. An egg is not just an egg in *Pathologic*, it's an "empty illusion of possible life". You need to scoff many empty illusions of possible life to keep your hunger bar from maxing out and eventually killing you. Wells spread through the town help you quench your thirst regularly, but disease and exhaustion are persistent factors you have to manage all the time. The town has a detailed barter economy, and I eventually started to

find semi-reliable ways to source food from kid gangs (they love sharp objects so hoard those scissors), but the survival elements have been harshly tuned. You're going to die, at which point the dandy of fate will

curse you permanent ailments like a health or hunger debuff.

The survival systems constantly get in the way of a fascinating mystery game. When you chat to key figures in the town, they drop motes

of information that form a growing web in your journal. Empty nodes imply there's more to explore in a given line of enquiry. It's a great way to keep track of the abundance of leads you collect from day to day. There are so many threads I wanted to tug at. What happened to my father? What's inside the floating tower where half the town's children have gone to live? Who, or what, is locked inside the abattoir?

It manages to be quite an atmospheric game, even in spite of rigid character models, static faces, sparse and repetitive interiors, and an extremely clumsy first-person

As a surgeon, you can extract organs from any corpse and then sell them

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A survival game set in a grim town beset by a mysterious disease

EXPECT TO PAY

£28

DEVELOPER

Ice Pick Lodge

PUBLISHER

tinybuild

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i5-2500K, 6GB RAM, GeForce GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

www.pathologic-game.com

combat system. The game is always pushing back against your attempts to explore, but there are delightfully macabre ideas hiding away in corners of the town, like gurgling tree roots that drink blood and give you herbs in return. As a surgeon, you can extract organs from any corpse and then sell them to a particular buyer for food and medicine. These opportunities open up organically during a day/night cycle that also serves as a doomsday clock pushing the town closer to disaster.

It's a slog, and that's the point of it. The suffering of your character and the townspeople is reflected in the torment of ever-hungry survival bars that drive you to theft and murder. One character talks about how her client asked her to design the town's layout to be deliberately confusing and annoying to navigate, in order to stretch people like a spring so that, in a position of distress, they might discover deeper wells of creativity.

NO FUN ALLOWED

The speech has the ring of authorial self-insert, but I haven't experienced enlightenment yet, only annoyance. Health bar management is a tedious admin task that communicates nothing in the way of true suffering or even discomfort – the dissonant sound design does a much better job of this. Though I admire the way the game keenly rejects the idea that games should always be satisfying fun factories, I just don't see the worth in wrapping a good mystery in layers of irritant. The devs are planning to add difficulty options that should make the game a bit less crushing. Until then put off that spooky train ride home unless you're sure you'll enjoy Ice Pick Lodge's original vision for the game. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

A gruelling mystery game that smothers its big ideas with incredibly dour survival mechanics.

66

ROGUES *Guess which one of these Pathologic characters we've made up*



BIG VLAD

Town kingpin, runs a vast abattoir, wishes you were his son.



BAD GRIEF

Collects scissors and lives in a warehouse with kids and invisible animals.



WRONG'UN ROBIN

Eats fingernails and complains endlessly about Game of Thrones.



MURKY

Thinks he can hear the voices of the dead in herbs, idiot.

ANSWER: Sure, Wrong'un Robin isn't in *Pathologic 2*, but he exists in real life somewhere.

Mimes offer insights into characters' private thoughts.



Dream sequences are full of odd symbolism.



The town's fate is decided in this strange cathedral.



This is normal behaviour by *Pathologic* standards.



VERMIN AGE: INQUISITION

Face the devastation of 14th century France
in **A PLAGUE TALE: INNOCENCE**. By Malindy Hetfeld

On a lovely afternoon in autumn, Amicia De Rune is out on a hunt with her father and the family dog, a scene so warm and tranquil you just know things are going to go very wrong very soon. That doesn't make it any less shocking when Amicia suddenly comes face to face with the Plague, which manifests itself not only as a horrible disease, but as a teeming mass of rats that devours everything in its wake.

Amicia and her father make their way home, only to find the Inquisition at their doorstep. For reasons unknown they want Amicia's little brother Hugo and are not above slaughtering their way through to him. Due to an illness, the small Hugo's lived a completely sheltered life and is basically a stranger to his sister, but in the face of death it's her task to protect him at all costs. *A Plague Tale* starts off strong with a

completely heartrending intro to the linear stealth action-adventure that sees the siblings sneak their way through the family estate while Inquisition soldiers make short work of their loved ones.

It's also an effective introduction to your tools and responsibilities. As Amicia you keep Hugo close during sneaking passages, not letting go of his hand unless absolutely necessary and shielding him from the most gruesome sights. If there's climbing to be done, Hugo goes up and over first, and he helps open new passages by squeezing through openings his

sister won't fit. Amicia's sling is a multipurpose item that can be used to distract soldiers by throwing stones at nearby metal items or destroy simple fastenings of drawbridges and the like.

Soon the children make it to a small town. It's here that not only the Plague's full extent becomes obvious, but also how woefully under-prepared Amicia is to take care of a child she hardly knows and who's fussing about

wanting to return home. Hugo's disobedience is an absolutely realistic source of frustration throughout the game, and a lot of Amicia's character growth comes from how she handles it. Only a child herself, she can get it wrong and lose her patience, but in consistently strong dialogue she tries her best to impress the seriousness of their situation onto Hugo.

Unfortunately your actions in *A Plague Tale* for the most part don't support the oppressive atmosphere the narrative builds, mostly because it's a game that isn't challenging to begin with, and only becomes easier.

The amount of violence on display also poses a tonal problem

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A stealth action-adventure about two kids on the run

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Asobo Studio

PUBLISHER
Focus Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Core i5-8400, GTX 1060, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
www.aplague tale.com

The first time you have to resort to violence, face a giant swarm of rats or even just see a pile of dead bodies all feel momentous, until all of these things turn into business as usual.

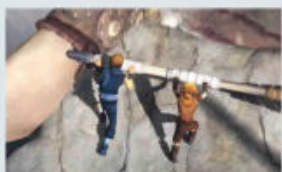
THE RATS

You start with nothing but your sling and a few stones, which you can use to down enemies that don't wear helmets. Over time your arsenal grows, thanks to a number of alchemical recipes that allow you to craft bombs, sleeping draughts and rat bait. In theory this should make for a wealth of options in how to get rid of or around enemies, but *A Plague Tale* always communicates the preferred solution, either by placing specific alchemical ingredients nearby or by literally having your companion tell you what to do.

While your options grow, the number of enemy types doesn't, and towards the middle of the game you've seen and fought the same handful of soldiers slowly walking their predetermined routes so often that things feel repetitive rather than threatening. Rats too turn from a horrifying force to a mere annoyance as you gain more and more ways to work around them using light or tasty soldier corpses.

The amount of violence on display also poses a tonal problem – it's difficult to believe Amicia is truly haunted by what she's doing when she's also dropping chandeliers on people's heads. The siblings and the friends they make along the way provide an interesting perspective on the many horrors of the 14th century, and their evolving relationship with each other is *A Plague Tale's* great draw, but the plot taking a bizarre turn towards the end makes for a botched landing at the last minute. ■

GO IT TOGETHER *Other games featuring protagonist pairs*



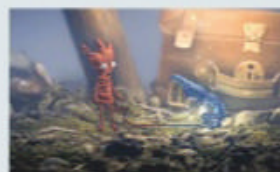
BROTHERS - A TALE OF TWO SONS
Melancholic fairytale in which you control two brothers to solve puzzles.



ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST
Nothing bonds two people like one enslaving the other with a headband.



NEVER ALONE
This puzzle-platformer isn't only cute, it also teaches you about Iñupiaq culture.



UNRAVEL TWO
Travel a Scandinavian landscape as two sentient balls of yarn. Less weird than it sounds, honest!

PC GAMER VERDICT

Beautiful and emotionally affecting, *A Plague Tale* nonetheless suffers from a lack of variety and tonal inconsistencies.

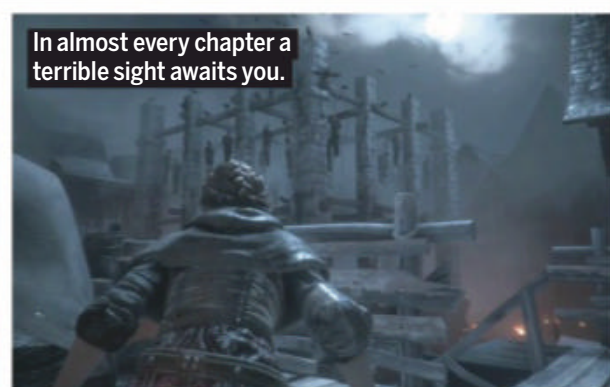
72



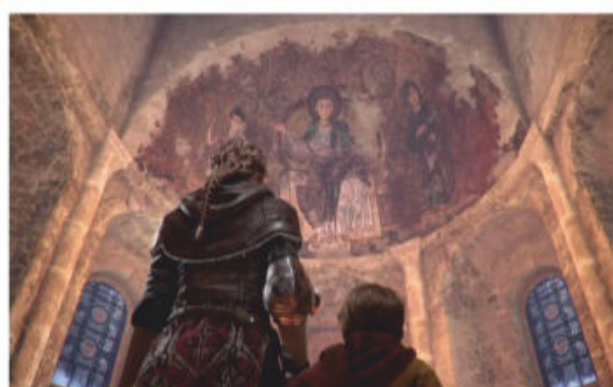
A *Plague Tale*'s varied environments are filled with beautiful details.



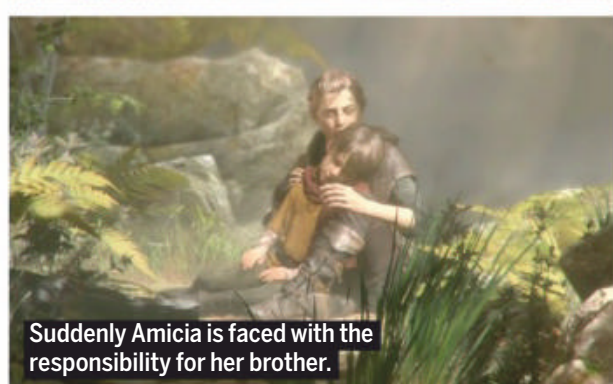
The siblings have to get through some situations without the other.



In almost every chapter a terrible sight awaits you.



New friends help you with their skills along the way.



Suddenly Amicia is faced with the responsibility for her brother.



BLOW BY BLOW

Hacking and slashing away at the highly skill-dependent medieval melee in **MORDHAU**. By T.J. Hafer

Most games that hand you a sword and point you in the direction of a battalion of foes feel empowering and heroic. After a few rounds of Mordhau, the prospect of heading into the breach seemed more terrifying than anything else. Of all the multiplayer melee games I've played, this one has decidedly the highest skill cap and the least patience for those who haven't taken the time to learn its complex combat.

The upside is when you do go on a hot streak, you feel like way more of a badass than any of those more forgiving games can ever let you feel.

The basic premise is pretty simple. In the default Frontline mode, you take up arms as a rugged warrior from one of nine classes (or you can design your own) and rush into the fray in up to 32-v-32, objective-based skirmishes on attractive, realistically-structured medieval battlefields. Then, you probably die pretty quickly to someone a bit quicker or more experienced than you and respawn, hopefully having learned something to take forward into your next brawl.

Each clash of swords can look deceptively simple, but is actually highly complex in the huge variety of attacks, parries, and counters available to you. A well-scripted and straightforward tutorial will run you

through the fundamentals, but it's another matter entirely to execute the correct moves at the right time. It takes many hours just to start feeling competent, but the satisfaction of growing confidence as your

execution improves is something no numerical progression system can replicate. It reminded me a lot of *Sekiro*, in that I started out as an absolute scrub and eventually started to think of myself as a badass

swordsman, at least sometimes.

Each clash of swords can look deceptively simple

SWIFT AS A RIVER

Everything you do in melee is highly dependent on split-second timing, so sloppy or indecisive swordplay will be punished heavily by experienced players. You can't hold down block while brandishing a sword, for instance. Left-click executes a timed parry that only works for about a second, so you need to sync it up

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Complex, twitch-based multiplayer melee combat

EXPECT TO PAY
£24

DEVELOPER
Triternion

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10 64-bit, Core i7-4770K, 16GB RAM, GeForce GTX 1070.

MULTIPLAYER
Up to 64 Online

LINK
mordhau.com

with your opponent's movements. And almost any defensive measure you deploy has an equivalent counter that will slap it aside with ease, so most duels will favour whichever player can read their opponent and react quickly and aggressively.

It is a bit of a bummer that there's not a lot you can do when you're just learning the ropes and want to take a more relaxed support role. There is an engineer class who can shake things up by deploying siege weapons and the like, but I often found my contributions in this area were relatively small and easily undone by the other classes. In other multiplayer games like *Battlefield V* and *Overwatch*, I can focus on reviving teammates or locking down a point if I want a little bit of a break from high-intensity combat, but *Mordhau* doesn't support that playstyle especially well.

Even with its early success, I worry that this will shrink the number of players who can really get into *Mordhau*. If I want to invite my younger cousin who isn't up to Murderlord level in melee action games into a match, there would be comparatively less for him to do that might make him feel useful. Even the most hardened swordsman has to admit that giving less twitch-skilled players something to do helps fill the servers and give us more fresh meat to beat up on. That doesn't work if they all get frustrated and leave.

Archery, too, I found a bit disappointing. *Mordhau* has gone the route of making arrows very powerful, but very difficult to land a hit with. Drawing back the bow requires about a second in which your crosshair moves in a semicircle, making it almost impossible to aim, then gives you a couple seconds of a steady hand before you start to wobble and lose your aim. The projectiles themselves are fairly slow and experience significant drop-off after leaving the string. This comes across as very realistic, but not especially fun, and it makes becoming

WEAPON OF CHOICE You open your first chest, how screwed are you?

Lute, Wooden Mallet
Alt-F4 will probably save you some time.

Dagger, Short Sword, Cleaver, Quarterstaff, Bows
I hope you're good at this game. Like, really good.

Training Sword, Arming Sword, Axe, Warhammer, Blacksmith's Hammer, Throwing Knife, Falchion, Mace, Crossbow
You might actually make it out of this alive.



Short Spear Rapier, Bastard Sword, War Axe, Battle Axe, Longsword, Maul, Throwing Axe
Take a breath. You got lucky, but you need to stay sharp.

Billhook, Estoc, Greatsword, Poleaxe, Executioner Sword, Bardiche, Eveningstar, Spear
The gods have smiled upon you. Don't mess this up.

Zweihander, Halberd
You're all clear, kid! Now let's blow this thing and go home!

On this episode of MythBusters, can you parry a blow struck from a horse at full gallop?



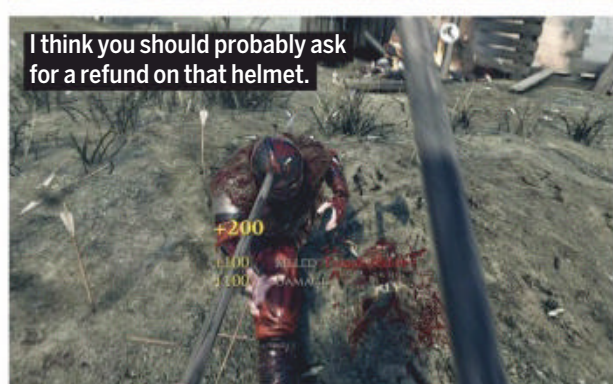
I have you now!



I've killed better men than you with kitchen utensils smaller than this.



I think you should probably ask for a refund on that helmet.



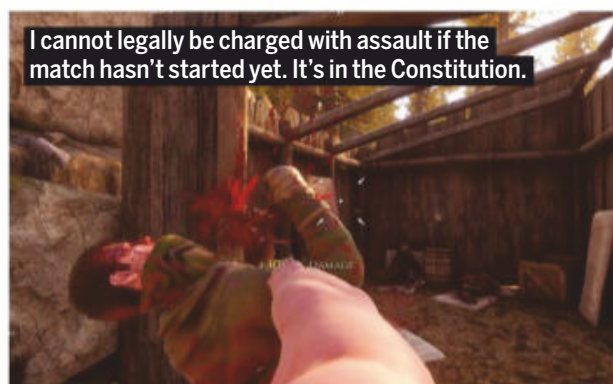
Okay, spoilers – I did not shoot the giant rock out of the air.



It's a lot easier to be brave when you have a car door strapped to your arm.



I cannot legally be charged with assault if the match hasn't started yet. It's in the Constitution.



Sir! I said one at a time sir! Sir! SIR!



Archery is hard, but if you fire into general chaos, you're bound to hit someone eventually.



The exact moment I realised I should have been a tanner like my uncle wanted.



an even somewhat effective archer even more difficult than getting the hang of melee.

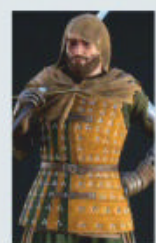
The root of the problem is trying to simulate realistic archery in what are, ultimately, pretty unrealistic conditions. You didn't see a lot of medieval battles with a couple dozen guys in armour darting around in loose formation, changing direction on a dime, jumping over logs and intermingling with each other's troops. It's chaos, usually leaving archers vulnerable on the sidelines and trying to take 1,000-to-1 shots of opportunity at individual targets. In reality, these types of troops would only have been deployed en masse to fire at stationary formations. The one place it does work kind of decently is on maps with walls or a palisade where archers can take shots at advancing enemies from a position of safety. But on bigger, open battlefields, what's the point?

Mordhau also features two other gameplay modes: Battle Royale and a Horde mode. I didn't like either of them as much as Frontline, but Horde can be a fun way to learn the ropes with the help of some more skilled players without having to worry too much about being skewered by those same veterans.

In Horde, you start with no equipment and have to kill waves of AI attackers to get money to buy better stuff. The baddies will keep pace with you, however, gaining better equipment and coming in greater numbers from one wave to the next. Their combat ability is significantly inferior to a skilled player's, but they have a tendency to mob up on any solo fighters they can single out. It becomes important to stick together and use formations and natural choke points to survive. Overall, it's not as much a test of the things *Mordhau* does best as the PvP modes, but it's still a fair bit of fun.

Battle Royale is my least preferred of *Mordhau*'s modes. Like Horde, you start with no equipment and have to scramble for randomised loot from chests scattered across the map. It's a familiar song and dance from there, as the playable area will slowly shrink to force confrontations and the last one standing wins. Having played other battle royales I didn't find

CLASS WAR *Picking the right class for your playstyle is important*



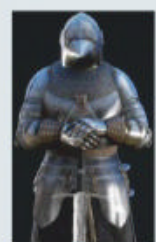
BRIGAND
Medium armour,
big-ass sword
Recommended for: I trust in my skill with steel, and I don't want or need any extra protection.



PROTECTOR
Heavy armour,
shield, mace
Recommended for: If I can't beat them, I at least want to make it as hard as possible to take me out.



HUNTSMAN
Light armour, bow
Recommended for: I decided to play an archer even though the review just told me archery is not very fun.



KNIGHT
Heavy armour,
greatsword
Recommended for: I want to get better at swordplay, but I'm not taking chances defence-wise.



RAIDER
Medium armour, big axe
Recommended for: I want to look like a viking. (Author note: I do this every game, so no judgment.)



VETERAN
Heavy armour,
gigantic mace
Recommended for: My parents told me I could be anything. So I became a can opener.



FOOTMAN
Medium armour,
spear
Recommended for: Stopping that guy who keeps sprinting to get a horse so he can trample us.



SCOUNDREL
Light armour, bear trap
Recommended for: I like to get my kills quickly and, preferably, after I've left the vicinity.



ENGINEER
Light armour,
toolbox
Recommended for: Anyone who has the patience to painstakingly set up a stationary ballista.

anything spectacular about it that would convince me to come back when there are so many existing options, and *Mordhau*'s other modes are more fun.

CLASS CONSCIOUS

Mordhau's kit design and progression system is very in-depth and interesting, aside from the odd fact that you get the choice between several skin colours that are all just different shades of white. This isn't supported by history to begin with, but *Mordhau* also doesn't seem to be

trying to simulate any real-life historical factions or events, which makes it especially weird.

There are a lot of equipment options, which let you be anything from a lightly-armoured

berserker with a big axe to a tanky knight with full plate and a deadly mace. New visual and mechanical options unlock as you level up your profile from one match to the next, so there's always something shiny and new to look forward to.

My biggest complaint is online stability. The matchmaking sometimes doesn't even work at all (though I

had very few problems joining matches from the server browser), and there were times when I spent over two hours in a queue without successfully getting into a match. That experience wasn't super common, but random lag spikes and even getting booted from a game due to connection issues were.

Performance was also very inconsistent on some maps even with a GTX 1070. The devs are aware of these issues and it has been getting better over the last couple weeks. But I still haven't successfully queued for Frontline through the matchmaking even once, so you'll want to use the server browser for that mode.

If you've got the patience and dexterity to take full advantage of its melee combat, *Mordhau* can be a real treat. Especially in the Frontline mode, slashing and stabbing across its well-designed maps was really entertaining once I got my feet under me. The high skill cap and lack of good supporting roles can make it feel tiring at times, but it's mostly worth it for the satisfaction that comes with increasing mastery. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Melee gameplay is equally rewarding and daunting, though the archery and support roles needs some work.

84

***Mordhau*'s kit design and progression system is very in-depth**



FARCE 'SCAPE

Get bombarded by British jokes and annoying enemies in the repeating corridors of **VOID BASTARDS**. By Samuel Roberts

Ever since *BioShock Infinite* released and *Irrational* in its previous form went away, I've gladly played any games that offer a comparable experience. That is, a first-person shooter where you have more at your disposal than just cool guns. *Void Bastards* is described as a strategy shooter inspired by *System Shock 2* and *BioShock*, and it features the talents of some former *Irrational* staff who previously made 2013's *Card Hunter*.

You are a prisoner, travelling across the galaxy to fulfil the whims of an HR computer that might eventually grant you your freedom. You get across the map with an *FTL*-style interface, and while most locations are enemy spaceships that you can board, loot and escape, there are also stores, asteroid ranges and deadly hazards to be aware of. Mostly, though, your time is spent navigating ships in first-person, looking for specific items to progress, then escaping before you're killed.

Your character has perks, both positive and negative, and if you die, you play as another criminal with different perks. Negative perks might be your character coughing every now and then, attracting enemy attention, or being more easily detected by security cameras and gun turrets. A positive perk might be better aim, or a higher chance of a critical shot. The ships are partly procedurally generated – the maps of the different vessels you'll board stay

the same, but walls, enemy locations, obstacles and more will change each time. This means you can roughly learn where you're going on each ship, but that you can't really be certain of what you'll go up against.

Sometimes the game does capture the thrilling feeling of being a thief

While there is a stealth element to *Void Bastards* and you do have some silent weapons, it's mostly about shooting weird, British aliens in small corridors and rooms. The standard immersive sim

elements are here: you can hack turrets to fight on your side, or shut down security from a terminal on the ship. You have a dart gun.

The crafting system in *Void Bastards* is excellent, and I say that as someone who usually loathes boring equivalent systems in other games. If you want to make something specific, a location tool in the game will tell you which ship on the map will grant you the parts to make it. Everything you craft is consistent between deaths, so the penalty for dying is usually just being further away from

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
BioShock-y FPS where you steal things from spaceships

EXPECT TO PAY
£24

DEVELOPER
Blue Manchu

PUBLISHER
Humble Bundle

REVIEWED ON
i5-3570K, 16GB RAM, GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
N/A
LINK
www.voidbastards.com

your main objective. You could die a whole bunch of times and not reach your goal, but in that time your armoury can grow exponentially. It's a neat and rewarding power curve.

Here's the problem, though – I only intermittently enjoyed *Void Bastards*' actual combat. The tools are great, and often fun to use, but the enemy types are mostly a poor fit for what you have in your inventory. Some are deliberately overpowered and meant to be avoided, which is fine. Exploding enemies that sometimes sit behind doors and blow up before you ever see them are not favourites of mine, though.

It's the NPC barks that really turn me off the enemies in *Void Bastards*. One of the basic enemies shouts "surprise, buttface/twatface!" whenever you're caught by them, which I just can't stand, and the game is rife with enemies barking irritating British things.

THIEVES IN SPACE

Sometimes the game does capture the thrilling feeling of being a thief who grabs the objective, gets caught, then escapes in a hail of gunfire. Mostly, though, I found firefights just a bit of a slog, with some levels jam-packed with enemies.

It'll take around 12-15 hours to finish a single run, and even after doing that, you can carry on unlocking stuff and taking on harder enemies. I'm considering another run, even though I spent so long sighing at enemy barks, or getting shot at by inexplicably placed turrets, or getting too close to exploding enemies without realising it. There's just something very compelling about arriving on a new ship and finding that next thing you need that *Void Bastards* nails. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A slightly messy first-person shooter elevated by some excellent weapons and a gorgeous art style.

71

SHIP SHAKERS My favourite tools in Void Bastards



CLUSTERFLACK
Fires out a near-unreasonable amount of cluster bombs. Throw it, run away.



STAPLER
The version of the shotgun in *Void Bastards* fires staples, and it's a treat to use.



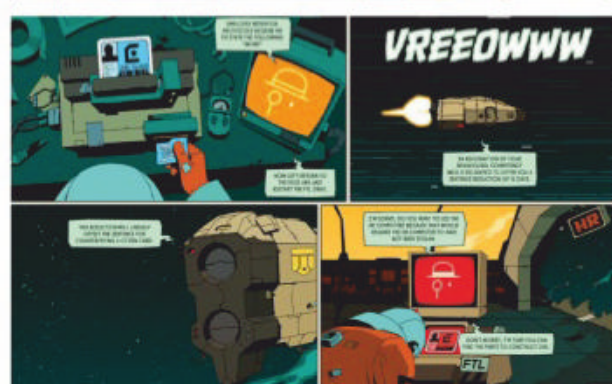
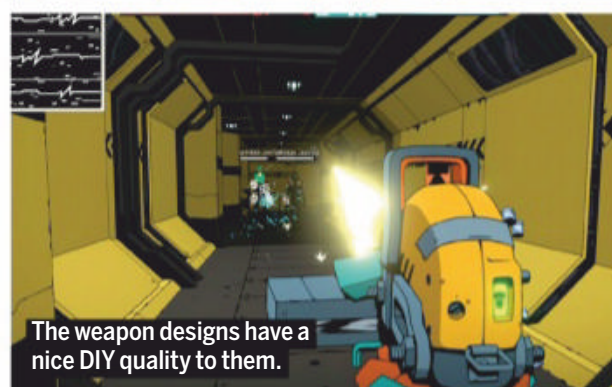
GERMSPIKER
Poisons an enemy, which slowly depletes their health, and can be used in stealth.



RIFTER
Manually teleport your enemies. They can't shoot while you're deciding where to put them.



UNSTABLE KITTY
Enemies will shoot at this, and when it's destroyed, it leaves a nice big explosion.



NURGLE'S ROT

WARHAMMER: CHAOSBANE is a by the numbers action RPG. *By Tom Hatfield*

Chaosbane is exactly what you'd expect if you heard the words "mid-budget Warhammer *Diablo* clone". You pick one of four heroes, you kill endless hordes of creatures and you loot progressively shinier trousers, stopping occasionally to fight a larger, tougher monster with an annoying area attack. That's it. I wouldn't call it a bad game, but it is a mediocre and derivative one, and far too repetitive for its own good. It's *Diablo*, but Warhammer.

The Warhammer licence does help a little, particularly in the enemy design. Each act is framed as a battle against followers of a different chaos god (representing war, magic, disease and sexytimes respectively), and there's a deep pool of appropriate monsters to draw from for each including a big end-of-level boss. I particularly enjoyed fighting Slaanesh, whose agile followers would backflip out of combat and manoeuvre around, preventing fights from descending into one big mosh pit.

Technically there's a story, that links these acts together, but it's so basic my eyes started glazing over in the very first cutscene. I didn't expect a compelling narrative, but after the cheerful banter of *Vermintide* and *Mechanicus* I was hoping for something mildly entertaining.

Chaosbane's big problem is repetition, there's so little variation in the combat. Despite a handful of new skills unlocking my basic approach – hold down attack, hit an area attack when surrounded and a health draining attack when hurt – didn't change much between hour one and hour 15, despite the ability to swap around skills at will. One of my attacks noted that it ignored armour, but since there was no real indicator which enemies were heavily armoured and which were not, it was impossible to figure out when to use it effectively, and I soon traded it for another big area attack.

Loot didn't hold my interest either. The majority of items are uninteresting stat boosts that don't materially change the way you play. Perhaps real game changer items lurk in the endgame, but in the time I had with the game I never made it far enough to encounter any. The mark of a good action RPG is that you should be regularly getting new skills or items that make you want to change your style and approach things differently, and *Chaosbane* doesn't do this anywhere near often enough. Part of this might have been the fact that I spent the majority of my time playing as the trollsayer (in my defence, orange mohawked dwarves are rad). Unfortunately he mostly just does different kinds of axe swing, while occasionally picking up better tattoos. Things got a bit

Chaosbane's big problem is repetition, there's so little variation

or items that make you want to change your style and approach things differently, and *Chaosbane* doesn't do this anywhere near often enough.

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NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Warhammer
Diablo clone

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Eko Software

PUBLISHER
Bigben Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5, 16gb RAM, GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
Both local and online
co-op.

LINK
www.warhammer-chaosbane.com

more interesting when I restarted as a high elf mage, who had a nice floaty orb attack that could be redirected with the right stick to waggle it in and out of the daemons.

ORBED TO DEATH

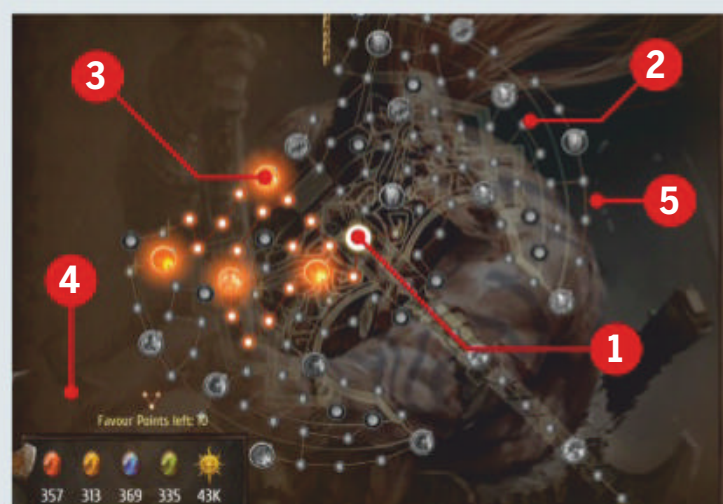
One thing I did enjoy was the bloodlust orbs: every now and then an enemy will spit out a glowing red globule. Grab one and it'll heal you up, collect enough and you'll be able to activate a 'super' mode where your character is nigh indestructible and does massive damage. What makes it work is that the orbs only stick around for a few seconds, meaning you're forced to manoeuvre around the battle in order to grab them mid-fight. It gives you something to think about other than watching a big bunch of numbers pop up, which is what *Chaosbane* desperately needs.

I only got to spend a short time with *Chaosbane's* multiplayer for this review. It was fairly easy to drop into a random game, even with the low number of people online, but when I got there the enemies exhibited a pronounced tendency to awkwardly rubber band towards one player or another. It was nothing unplayable, but it was noticeable.

More promising is the inclusion of four player local co-op, which is so easy to set up I actually managed to start it accidentally mid dungeon. You can even combine local and online co-op. That's the one context I can see myself going back to *Chaosbane*, when you just want to throw something on in big picture mode to play with a bunch of mates.

It's hard to blame *Chaosbane* for merely being an unoriginal action RPG, but ultimately I found myself asking over and over "Why don't I just play *Diablo* instead?". ■

GRIND *Introducing the god skill board*



1 Start here

2 Minor node: Gives a small stat bonus

3 Major node: Unlocks a powerful combat ability

4 Fragments: I honestly do not know why it takes five different currencies to use this thing.

5 Axe: Axe

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Unfortunately *Chaosbane* is mediocre and repetitive. There are far better options out there.

58



Axe Axe Axe Axe.



The great unclean one: basically a grimdark poop emoji.



Honestly this is what the game looks like 90 per cent of the time.



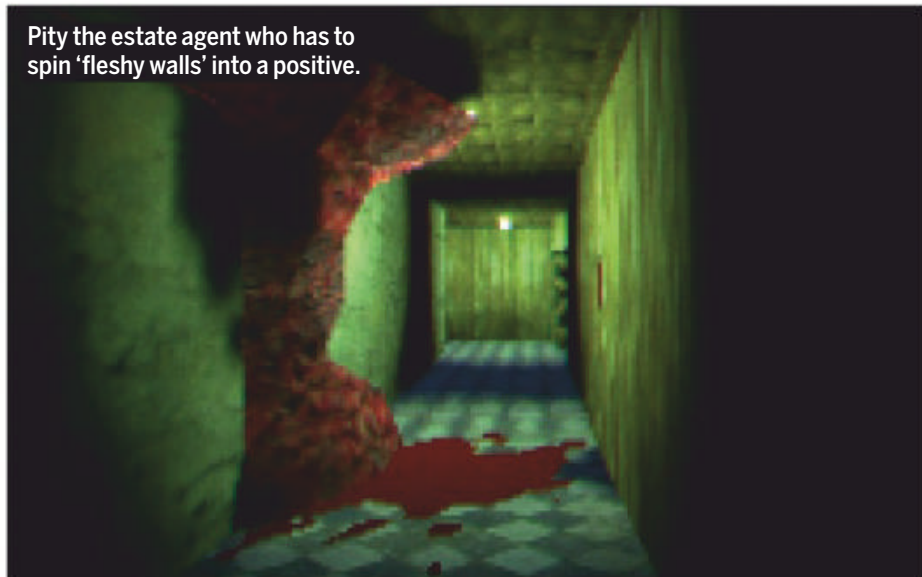
Slaanesh: Problematic but fun to fight.



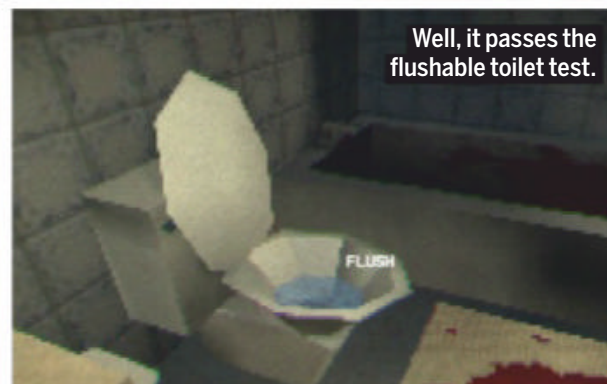
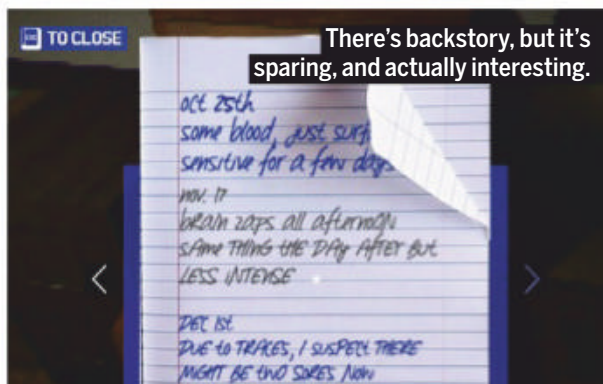
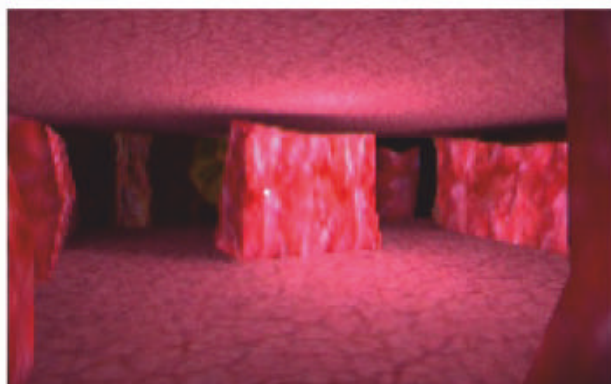
The Bloodthirster. He thirsts. For blood.

SPEK.TAKL

Pity the estate agent who has to spin 'fleshy walls' into a positive.



It's a nice enough flat. Though it doesn't stay that way for long.



Well, it passes the flushable toilet test.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Terror hits at home in the body horror of **SPEK.TAKL**. By Tom Sykes

While every other game with a mysterious story sups from the damn fine coffee and delectable cherry pie of *Twin Peaks*, Somewhat's *SPEK.TAKL* is the rare game to explore the territory of The Fly director David Cronenberg. In the body horror of *Videodrome*, technology and flesh become intertwined – just as the apartment setting of *SPEK.TAKL* morphs to resemble the inside of a human body.

You wake up one day in a flat that you're unable to escape from, and where a TV set plays ancient propaganda films on a loop. Films about the dangers of masturbation, or the threat of homosexuality, before a mysterious stranger provides you with viewing matter that's less ridiculous, and more unnerving. Tapes posted through the letterbox contain footage of your apartment, footage spliced into a series of prophetic short films resembling the deadly videotape in *The Ring*.

These freaky videos are unsettling artefacts in their own right: evidence that someone or something has been in the flat before you, or worse, that they're in it *right now*. But they're also a clever tool to guide the player from room to room, as clues to your next objective are hidden inside the

footage. You'll spend your half-hourish with the game following hints from one bloody thing to another, as more tapes arrive, and as the fabric of the world slowly shifts around you.

Contrary to many horror games, which terrorise you with zombies, or with one persistent ghost, your home is your only enemy in *SPEK.TAKL*. The game resembles *PT*, but in reality it's closer to the under-appreciated *Silent Hill 4: The Room*, which

memorably took place in a messed-up apartment. As you investigate further – as you obey the videotapes, but also puzzle-solve by using items found in the environment – you'll finally reach its beating heart, where brick walls have transformed into pulsating flesh.

You may have noticed that Somewhat's game is extremely

These freaky videos are unsettling artefacts in their own right

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A first-person horror set in the world's worst Airbnb

EXPECT TO PAY

Free

DEVELOPER

Somewhat

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz, 6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

MULTIPLAYER

None

LINK

bit.ly/SpektGame

low-resolution, with great jagged pixels obscuring everything in sight. Partly, I think this was done to obscure the primitive 3D models, but it also gives the world an unreal, queasy quality that enriches the paranoid atmosphere. As you delve into its fleshy core, the walls begin to shudder, to warp horribly around you, as in an early PlayStation game. It's an arresting, unnerving visual effect. There are some wonderfully creepy sights, especially in the latter part of the game.

ITEM PUZZLES

The adventure-game-style item puzzles I mentioned earlier are appreciated, adding a welcome sprinkle of complexity and engagement with your environment. However, I found the menu a little buggy, causing me to become hopelessly trapped within the inventory a couple of times. That's a small complaint about one of the freshest horror games in ages. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Home is where the heart is in this paranoia-drenched horror game that knows how to get under your skin.

84

TOM WAITS

Sitting pretty in **THE INTERLUDE**. By Tom Sykes

Tom Petty was wrong about waiting being the hardest part. In fact, it's the best part of free, um, sitting game *The Interlude*, which is all waiting, all of the time. It's about the stuff that happens in the intervals between exciting moments: checking your phone, staring out of the window, that sort of thing. In its exquisite detail, it's also a strangely engrossing game.

Ten minutes. The Interlude will consume only ten minutes of your time, the game ending suddenly once those 600 seconds are up.

Your job, as perhaps a getaway driver, is to make contact with an associate, but what you do before that happens is up to you.

As you're stuck in the driver's seat, you can't get up to stretch your legs, but you *can* take a sip of coffee, play a game of *Snake* on your phone, or read

your messages for a few tantalising scraps of history.

Initially, the thrill is in playing with your environment, as you mess about with the wing mirrors, or flip your wipers on and off to see if you can. A few minutes later, it's in figuring out just why you're there, and what you have to do when your moment comes up.

Ten minutes is both a very long time, and a very short one, particularly when you've no easy way to track how long is left.

That's *The Interlude*'s master-stroke. The role you're there for will only take moments of your time, but as you don't know when it will be required of you, you're on edge for the entirety of the game.

That tension is really quite a feat in a game where you sit around, virtually (and maybe literally) scratching your behind. ■

79



NEED TO KNOW

DEVELOPER
CrawlSpace

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
crawlspacestudio.itch.io

EASY PC

Outside the box in **FILE://MANIAC**. By Tom Sykes

There have been several games recently that mess with the fourth wall separating their fiction from our reality. Games like *Doki Doki Literature Club*, or *IMSCARED*, whose self-aware horror spills out of the game and onto the files and folders of our PCs. There's a transgressive horror to a game outstepping its bounds like that. However, as *File://maniac* shows, there's great potential when it comes to other genres as well.

This is a puzzle game. A damned clever, yet brief one where you progress not by pulling switches, or MacGuyvering things together, but by manhandling files belonging to the game. That's the contents of the actual game directory, which you'll copy, delete, relocate or rename to fix problems within the game. In the fiction, you're a detective hunting

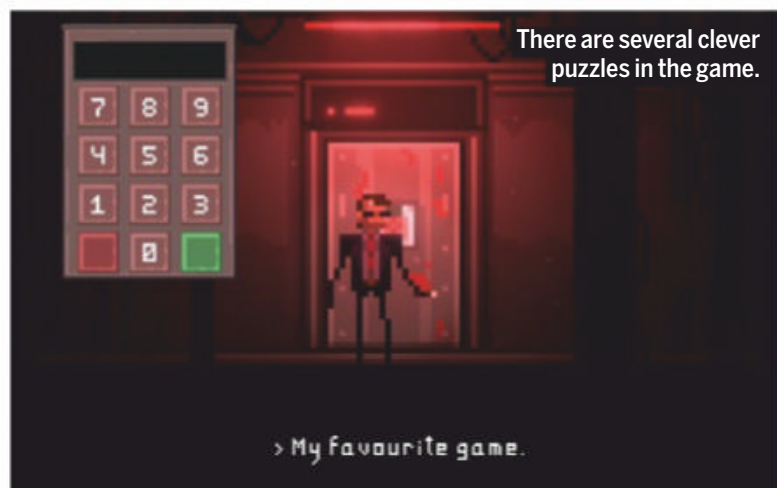
down a serial killer, but there's no reason given for your ability to intrude upon our world. Instead, in each room, you're merely told to look in the game folder, and given a strong hint about what you need to do there to proceed.

To get through a door, for example, you have to locate 'door.cfg' and physically delete it, an action that also removes it from the game.

Other puzzles are a little more involved, but only a little, in this small-scale 'pilot episode' for a series that will hopefully take the concept, and run with it.

There's so much potential here, at the moment largely unrealised. But even so, there's a thrill to playing with a game's files, and seeing it respond to your actions in real-time. This is a game about playing god. Which, in a serial killer story, is kind of appropriate. ■

65



NEED TO KNOW

DEVELOPER
BornFrustrated Studio

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
born-frustrated.itch.io

THEY'RE BACK

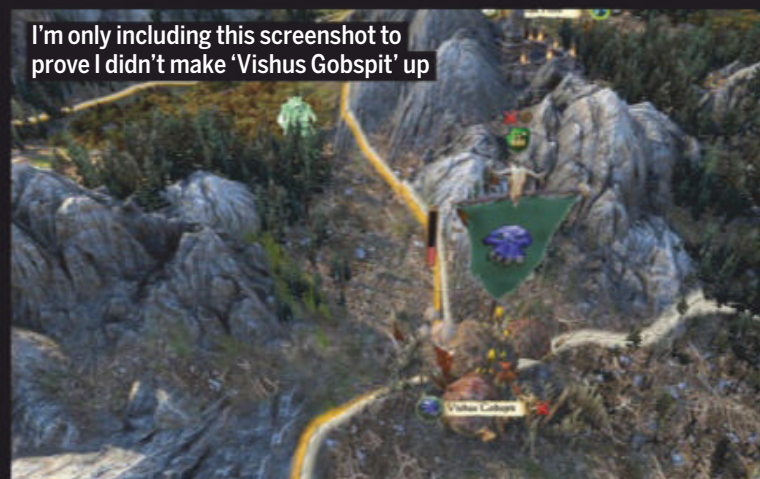
OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



Ironhammer is accompanied by vengeful ancestral spirits. Ghostlads, if you will.



I'm only including this screenshot to prove I didn't make 'Vishus Gobspit' up



SHELLFISH BEHAVIOUR

Abandoning tradition in **TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER II**

Now is a good time to go back to *Total War: Warhammer II*. It's had a steady flow of updates since release. The construction of the world has altered. You're now as likely to be sacked by crab-wrangling vampire pirates as you are orcs or beastmen. So this is a great opportunity to step outside my comfort zone and get a feel for how the landscape has evolved.

After 20 minutes spent looking at the faction select screen, I decide to play as Dwarfs. This is a very dwarfy thing to do – change is *bad* – but I promise I'm not just being boring. One of the things I love most about Total War games is how stories spring up as you play, adding context to the perpetual conflict. I want to experience how the new races and expanded map in the Mortal Empires mode feel different to my very first campaign in *Warhammer*. And I want to discover new stories, about what happens when I shoot vampire crabs with a cannon.

I choose Belegar Ironhammer of Clan Angrund because I love his probably-doomed quest to retake the hold of Eight Peaks. There's nothing dwarfier than inevitable failure. His starting area is also nearer the coast, so there's increased chance I'll tangle with pirates. But first, orcs. Lots of

orcs. Every dwarf campaign begins with the removal of local greenskin tribes, and Ironhammer's is no different. There's a horde nearby led by a warboss called Vishus Gobspit, a name so almost-rude it makes me do a double take every time I read it.

Luckily, he's more concerned with bothering my Border Prince neighbours, so I head south to retake my lost holds and reclaim an area known as The Vaults. Once that's done, I can start building an army to

retake Karak Eight Peaks. Cool.

WAAAGH!

I love getting back into the *Total War* loop: neatly reclaiming areas, researching new perks, managing resources. Right now it feels the same as the first game, except now there are so many factions I can grow a handsome beard between turns. It's

**There's nothing
dwarfier
than
inevitable
failure**

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

The grandest high fantasy strategy game ever made

EXPECT TO PAY

£40

DEVELOPER

Creative Assembly

PUBLISHER

SEGA

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-7700 CUP
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

[www.totalwar.com/
games/warhammer-ii](http://www.totalwar.com/games/warhammer-ii)

troubling starting as Ironhammer because unit upkeep is higher until you retake Eight Peaks. This is exactly the sort of thing that stresses me out, but that hard goal also makes for a more interesting campaign. Before long, I'm taking part in a battle that will see me retake the last settlement in The Vaults, so I can begin my quest in earnest. It'll all be fine so long as Vishus Gobspit and his massive army stays away from my lightly-defended capital.

Vishus sacks my capital, and ruins my campaign before I've shelled a single crab. It's my own fault – I tried to rush ahead before my army was ready – but it also feels like the gods are telling me to try something new. I start again as Luther Harkon, a vampire pirate. It's different, distant, and exhilarating – a reminder of just how huge and dense *Warhammer II*'s world now is. Perhaps I'll pay Ironhammer a visit and see the crustacean vs cannon battle from a fresh perspective. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

This is still a stellar strategy game and the best representation of the Warhammer world-that-was.

90

KEEPING TIME

Beaten by beats in **CRYPT OF THE NECRODANCER**

How have I not played this until now? *Crypt of the Necrodancer* is constructed from my two teenage passions of 1) anything with swords in it and 2) drumming. Unfortunately, it's also a jabbing reminder that I was never very good at the latter.

This means that I'm bad at *Crypt of the Necrodancer*. As you might have gleaned from the fact I picked Dwarfs in *TW: Warhammer II*, I like caution. Planning is my kink. So a game like this, that makes me move constantly while acting thoughtfully, is often beyond my meagre skills. I manage well enough with the early levels to feel moderately good about myself, but it's undermined by the creeping realisation that I'll be shit at *Necrodancer* when it gets tough. At one point, I fall through a trapdoor into a pit with a dragon, a mage and a lute-headed minotaur, and my

response is the equivalent of video game arrhythmia. Luckily, *Necrodancer* is so good I absolutely don't care. It's hard to think of a game that makes me feel this happy even when I'm being squashed.

Every new enemy is a challenge that requires detailed observation to beat. At first, I think I can just 'feel' my way through, but it doesn't work. I have to watch, learn, and overcome.

Just as I begin to get the hang of things, the game starts throwing changing tempos and new beats at me. It comes at exactly the right moment – the world still feels challenging, but I've got fond memories of the two minutes I spent feeling good about myself. When things go wrong, I've got nobody to blame but myself, which is a healthy thing to experience. It's part *Disco Gauntlet*, part therapy session, and I adore it. ■

88

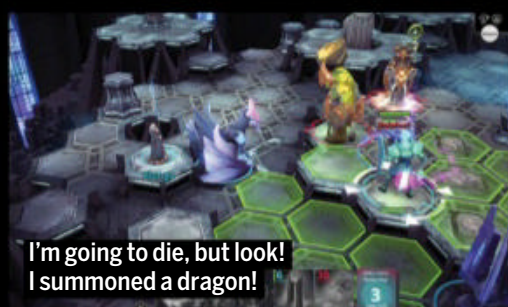


NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£11

DEVELOPER
Brace Yourself Games

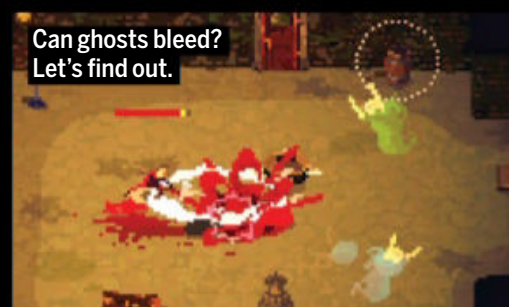
PUBLISHER
Brace Yourself Games



CHAOS REBORN

I was sort-of obsessed with the original *Chaos: Battle of the Wizards* when I was a kid – and by 'sort of', I mean that the tape is literally still in the deck in the ZX Spectrum, buried in my parents' loft. So going back to this updated version feels nostalgic like a school reunion with manticores and blobs. It's a crisp, neat, strangely satisfying update. I love the interface and monster designs. And even though it's a more cerebral experience than the original, the range of spells feels more familiar than something should after 30 years. There's a compelling campaign mode, which saves me the trouble of searching out old school friends for a long-overdue grudge match. ■

81



CRAWL

Chaos is a bedroom classic now played online. *Crawl* is the lo-fi opposite. It's a multiplayer game about ganging up on your friends. One player controls the hero, the others the monsters. Whoever succeeds takes their place, like a savage, dungeon-delving version of tag. I especially love that despite each game lasting only 30 minutes, there's a genuine sense of progression. Every player levels up in a different way and it always feels balanced. It's also a great test of your timing – but not in a *Necrodancer* way. At the risk of sounding like a motivational poster, picking exactly the right moment to kill your friends is the difference between success and failure. ■

75



KINGDOMS OF AMALUR: THE RECKONING

It's easy to be mean about *Kingdoms of Amalur's* low fantasy world of gnomes and underplaces and races that sound like they're copy-pasted from the self-published fantasy novel your cousin wrote. But there's something honest about *The Reckoning* – the RPG equivalent of a well-made cupboard. Plus the sprightly world and distracting quests make it feel like playing an MMO without all the other people getting in the way. ■

69

TIME TO STEP OFF THAT TREADMILL

With so many demands from work, home and family, there never seem to be enough hours in the day for you. Why not press pause once in a while, curl up with your favourite magazine and put a little oasis of 'you' in your day.



PRESS PAUSE
ENJOY A MAGAZINE MOMENT

To find out more about Press Pause, visit:
pauseyourday.co.uk

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

You'll need to drop some serious bones for this customisable Xbox Elite pad.





DualShock 4

PLAYSTATION **£44**

The best controller for PC

1 It isn't intended for use on the PC, but the DualShock 4 is my favourite controller anyway.

It doesn't *look* as durable as the Xbox One controller, but it's solid. When I squeeze the handles with as much force as I can, I can barely hear the strain. I also pushed each of the buttons, triggers, bumpers, and analog sticks down with as much force as I could, and each sprang back as if untouched.

The biggest caveat, which doubles as a positive, is that the DS4 is not designed with Windows PCs in mind. Whereas it's very easy to get an Xbox 360 or Xbox One controller working,

and most PC games will use their ABYX button prompts, you have to purchase Sony's expensive USB adapter or use the free unofficial DS4Windows software. The software essentially tricks Windows into treating the DS4 like an Xbox 360 controller, so just about any game which supports an Xbox 360 controller (basically any game with controller support) should work with the default profile. It also allows for a ton of customisation.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ➕ Great analog trigger feel
- ➕ Sturdy construction
- ➖ Requires unofficial software
- ➖ More expensive than Xbox Wireless

SPECS WEIGHT: 7.4OZ (210G) / **CONNECTIVITY:** BLUETOOTH / **BATTERY:** 1000MAH RECHARGEABLE

Xbox Elite Wireless

MICROSOFT **£135**

The best luxury controller

2 The 'Elite' nomenclature is typically marketing nonsense, but in this one instance, I think it applies.

It's a sturdy, configurable, and gorgeous controller for enthusiasts of fancy. The shell and button layout don't feel distinct from the vanilla Xbox One controllers, though it feels heavier than most pads I've used. I like a bit of weight in my controllers and mice, but it might not feel good on tiny wrists after a long play session. The face buttons are large and still mushy, the bumpers and triggers have a responsive click and pull – they just feel identical to using an Xbox One controller.

The addition of some slick software that allows for tweaking of trigger min/max values, stick sensitivities, button assignments, and profile designations makes it even more attractive for PC experimentation. Everything about the Elite controller feels considered, so even though its familiar design isn't stepping outside of what's tried and true, the configuration options make it an easy recommendation for those who can afford it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ➕ Easy to swap out components
- ➕ Robust companion software for button mapping
- ➖ Triple the price of a normal gamepad

SPECS WEIGHT: .85 LBS (348G +/- 15G) / **CONNECTIVITY:** XBOX WIRELESS / **BATTERY:** 2X AA (INCLUDED)

GROUP TEST

CONTROLLERS

Need a break from keyboard and mouse? We've found the best PC controller.

By Tyler Wilde

Let's face it, some games are better off with a PC controller in hand. As is apparently the case with *Rage 2*, certain games have garbage default key bindings. Others, like, say, most third-person action games, just aren't cut out for a mouse and keyboard setup. And can you imagine how awful it is playing *Mortal Kombat 11* on a keyboard? We can, because we've tried. It sucks.

Likewise, you won't persuade us that open world games such as *Grand Theft Auto* or *Far Cry* aren't enhanced by switching to a controller after climbing into a vehicle. While you can clutter your gaming space with a plethora of specific peripherals designed to support a specific genre - fight sticks, flight sticks or steering wheels - the controller is the

great generalist of PC gaming. It's an easy, often cheap solution for when you need some extra analogue control.

But how do you determine what is the best controller for you? Well, turn your head to the PC Gamer hardware collective. Across our favourite games, we've tried our hand at everything, from the plug-and-play simplicity of the Xbox Wireless and the PS4-intended DualShock 4, to Razer's Chroma-enabled Wolverine Ultimate and Logitech's affordable F310 Gamepad.

For the optimal AFK experience, we've thoroughly tested a variety of potential candidates for the prestigious title of best PC controller. We've narrowed the field down to just the best of the best. You'll find that shortlist below. All are great controllers, but one stands out as the best.



GROUP TEST

THE WOLVERINE
ULTIMATE DOES HAVE
ITS FAIR SHARE OF
UNIQUE, DOWNRIGHT
ENTICING FEATURES

3

Wolverine Ultimate

RAZER £160

Clicky with a side of Chroma

3 Although I'd prefer to have a choice in the matter, Razer does have a point with its Wolverine Ultimate controller. In a competitive setting, wired is better than wireless. Compatible with both PC and the Xbox One family of consoles, the Razer Wolverine Ultimate is similar in many ways to the Xbox One Elite Wireless Controller, customisable back paddles included. And for the price you may be wondering: why not just buy one of those instead?

Well, it's not for everyone, but the Wolverine Ultimate does have its fair share of unique, downright enticing features. For starters, the face buttons – the ones labeled

A, B, X and Y – click in like a mouse. Coming from a standard Xbox controller, this minuscule detail makes a huge difference.

Of course, no Razer product would be complete without a healthy dose of Chroma, the three-headed green snake company's signature brand of RGB lighting. However, rather than integrating it into the existing Synapse 3 app for Windows, Razer decided to develop an app specifically for Xbox One.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- + Swappable sticks and d-pad
- + Loud, satisfying face buttons
- No wireless option
- Expensive

SPECS WEIGHT: .6 LBS (272G) / CONNECTIVITY: USB WIRED / CORD LENGTH: 10 FT (3M)

Steam Controller

VALVE £40

The controller for games that don't support controllers

4 Valve's first attempt at making the living room a viable PC gaming space doesn't feel complete yet. Sure, the Steam Controller can control games, but it still feels like a midpoint between gamepad and keyboard-mouse control.

The grips are huge, part of an intentional convex design meant to arch your thumbs over the touchpads comfortably. Problem is, they're too bulbous and jut out a bit too hard into the heel of each hand. My fingers tense up after a few minutes of play, which leads to a few too many accidental back paddle presses and thumb cramps. It's not possible to outright recommend the Steam

Controller, even though with enough tinkering and patience, it's a completely viable way to control a ton of PC games from the couch.

So why is it listed here, among our round-up of the best controllers you can buy? Because the Steam Controller ultimately occupies a unique space in PC gaming: it's the only gamepad specifically built to let you play games that don't support controllers out of the box.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- + Can be used to control mouse-and-keyboard games
- + Highly configurable control mapping
- Design isn't very comfortable

SPECS WEIGHT: .63 LBS (287G) / CONNECTIVITY: 2.4GHZ WIRELESS / BATTERY: 500MAH RECHARGEABLE OR 2X AA



DUALSHOCK VS XBOX

Ignore those who seem to think every game is best with a mouse and keyboard. *Grid Autosport* is not best played with a keyboard. *Super Meat Boy* is not best played with a keyboard. *Ultra Street Fighter IV* is ridiculous with a keyboard. True, we play most games with a mouse and keyboard, but for PC gamers with ranging tastes, a good controller is a must.

Microsoft and Sony's own console pads – the Xbox Wireless controller and the DualShock 4 – set the standards by being the default, first-party options for the two most popular consoles, while third-party controllers tend to mimic them. In this case, the standard is the best. I haven't found a controller better than the DS4 for PC gaming, though the wireless Xbox One controller is very close.

It's a slightly surprising conclusion when the Xbox 360 and Xbox One controllers are the industry's accepted Windows gamepads, and even contradicts a previous article I wrote in which I recommended the Xbox One controller over the DualShock 4. In that article I explain that I prefer the shape and layout of Microsoft's controllers, but after further testing I've decided that when I put aside my personal preference for offset analog sticks, the DS4 stands out.

The older Xbox 360 controller is still great, and the out-of-the-box support makes it the easiest to use, but the DS4 is slightly better in a few key areas.

F310 Gamepad

LOGITECH £25

Lightweight and ultra-affordable

5 This controller is my favourite if you're on a tight budget – say, if you want two controllers for the price of one. At almost half the cost of a DualShock 4, you lose the wireless capability but still get a solidly-constructed gamepad that worked as soon as I plugged it in. The controller is light, but feels like a tank, so I have no fear of abusing it.

That said, the d-pad is nowhere near the quality of the DS4's – it feels loose and I had trouble accurately manoeuvring in *Super Meat Boy*. Also the triggers and bumpers are housed on outcroppings that the knuckles of my middle fingers rub

against uncomfortably, and the analog sticks, while pleasantly springy, have a convex shape that isn't great for sweaty hands. I also found that the triggers offer too much resistance. In *Grid Autosport* my finger got tired from holding accelerate, which I didn't experience with the DS4, Xbox 360, or Xbox One pads.

It's not the best, then, but the price makes it ideal if you need some cheap extra controllers for local co-op sessions.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- + Very affordable
- + Easy plug-and-play
- Stiff triggers
- Subpar d-pad

SPECS WEIGHT: .4 LBS (181G) / CONNECTIVITY: USB WIRED / CORD LENGTH: 6.5 FT (1.98M)

Xbox Wireless

MICROSOFT £35

A top-shelf budget controller

6 After a precarious relationship with the long-championed Xbox 360 gamepad, it is finally time to let go. The Xbox One Wireless controller has been available for quite some time now, and in addition to being cheaper than ever before, it boasts a vastly superior d-pad that you won't dread using in fighting games and platformers. In other words, friendship ended with Xbox 360 gamepad, now the Xbox Wireless controller is my best friend.

We capitalise Wireless for a reason, not because the word is a proper noun per sé, but because the Xbox Wireless controller of late leverages Microsoft's own

wireless protocol it calls "Xbox Wireless". Though the name itself could benefit from some creative workshopping, you can take solace in the fact that, after 2016, the Xbox Wireless controller was graced with a much-needed helping of Bluetooth compatibility. Once connected, the controller automatically works with almost all modern games, making it a great pick for PC players looking for a more couch-friendly experience.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- + Affordable
- + Officially supported by most games
- + Quality d-pad
- Still uses AA batteries

SPECS WEIGHT: .62 LBS (281G) / CONNECTIVITY: XBOX WIRELESS; BLUETOOTH / BATTERY: 2X AA



REVIEW

OCULUS RIFT S

Inside-out tracking makes the new Rift an attractive option. *By Bo Moore*

The Oculus Rift S sits at a crossroads. In one direction is the Oculus Quest, a standalone headset that doesn't require being tethered to a gaming PC, for the same price as the Rift S. In the other direction is the upcoming Valve Index, at more than double the price but with 144Hz screens and much more advanced sensors. In the middle is the Rift S, replacing the outgoing original Oculus Rift.

Let's start with what the Rift S does well. Visually, it offers a 1280x1440

display (per eye), an upgrade over the Rift's 1200x1080. After spending a few hours smashing bots in *Robo Recall* or fiddling around with the virtual desktop, it's clear that the new headset offers an improved viewing experience, despite the modest resolution bump. I didn't notice the 'screen-door' effect at all while playing games, though it's slightly noticeable when reading text on menus or the virtual desktop. One downside is the display runs at 80Hz instead of the previous Rift's 90Hz.

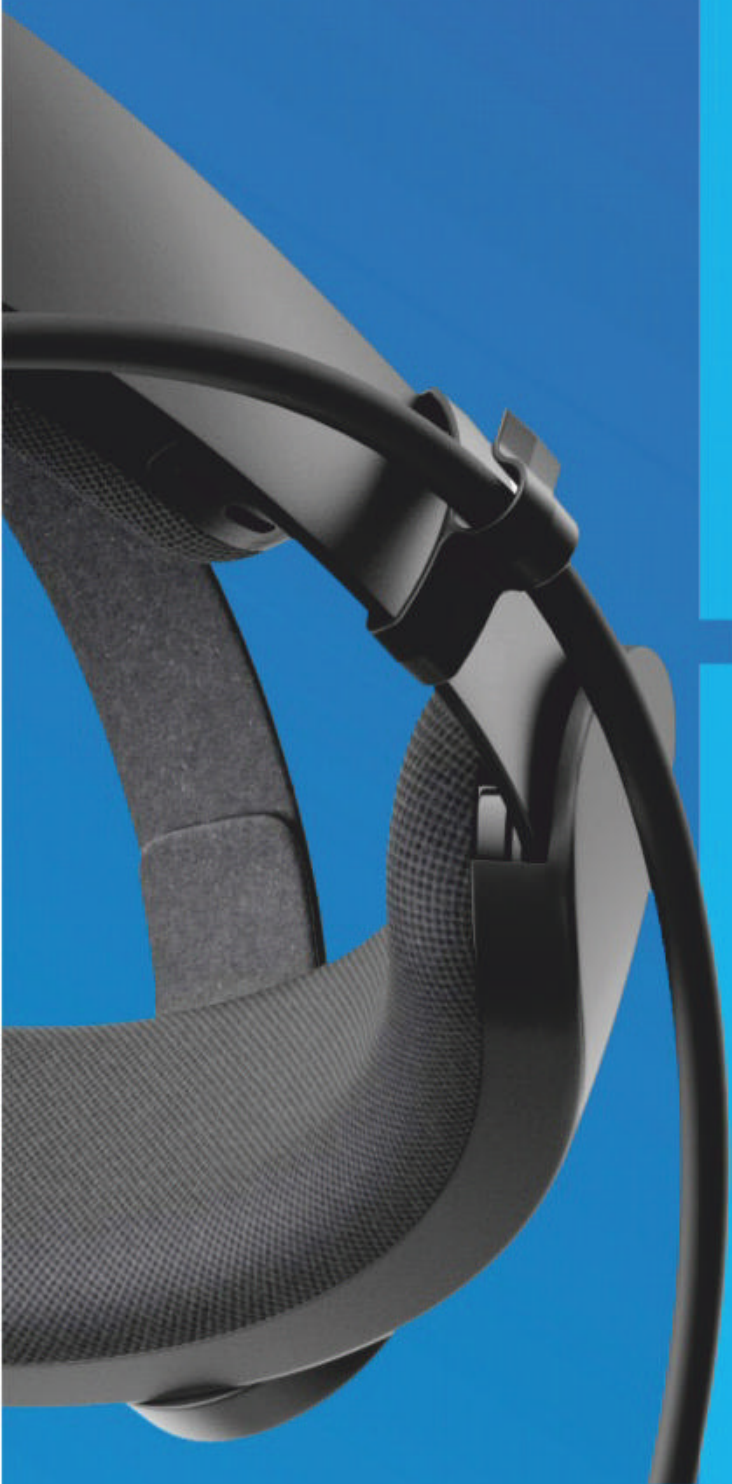
The other highlight of the Rift S is its tracking system. Where previous room-scale VR efforts like the Oculus Touch controllers and the HTC Vive

MAIN: The new Rift S replaces the original Oculus Rift model.

required base stations – sensors you place around your room to track the headset and controllers in 3D space – the Rift S uses an inside-out tracking system. Five cameras positioned on the headset itself track the controllers and headset, eliminating the need for external base station trackers.

Immediately this is a massive improvement for the VR experience. I was able to quickly get the Rift S set up, simply drawing a boundary area on the ground instead of relying on where the sensors are positioned to determine my safe-play zone (or having to place or mount sensors around my room in the first place). The lack of base stations also means fewer wires headed into your computer. The Rift S only requires a single DisplayPort and USB 3.0 connection, both of which are contained in a single tether from the headset.

The Rift S is comfortable to wear, with an adjustable velcro strap on top mixed with a dial-controlled headband that made it easy to put on, take off, and adjust as needed. It's also surprisingly light, weighing only 1.2 lbs. That's



actually a touch heavier than the original Rift headset, but it's distributed better so the weight is less noticeable.

The headband has built-in speakers that provide spatial audio while still letting you hear the sounds of your surroundings. The sound quality was surprisingly solid considering the open-air nature of the speakers, and I appreciated being able to tell when my roommate walked into the living room where I was playing. The headset also has a 3.5mm jack if you want to use your own earbuds or headphones for a more isolated audio experience.

The Rift S is positioned to be Oculus' new "gold-standard" VR experience. In other words, it's the one meant for PC gaming, as the lower-priced Oculus Go and the aforementioned Oculus Quest are both standalone headsets – no PC

tether required. As such, the Rift S is positioned to offer the best visual fidelity of the three Oculus offerings, though it's still a step down from the much more expensive Valve Index.

Which brings us back to that crossroads. The Rift S does offer slightly better visuals than the original Rift, but not really to the degree you'd expect from an offering coming three years after its predecessor. Part of that is due to the PC hardware requirements. To avoid fragmentation, the Rift S has the same required PC specs – a GTX 1060/ RX 480 GPU, primarily – as the original Rift. This makes the new headset accessible for a wider swath of potential users, but means that folks with the best graphics cards won't get to take as much advantage of their high-end hardware. In other words, despite being

TOP: Each eye now features a 1280x1440 resolution display.

ABOVE: New trackers eliminate the need for base stations.

Oculus' most high-end offering, the Rift S still feels like a mid-range VR headset.

EASY ENTRY TO VR

The actual high-end space is owned by the HTC Vive Pro and the new Valve Index. Those headsets are going to offer a higher-fidelity experience, but they also come with high-end price tags. Are you missing out on so much with this mid-range option that it's not worth it? I don't think so. Lots of people have gotten great use out of the now-aging original Rift headset, proving that you don't need to be on the absolute cutting edge to enjoy VR. In terms of both cost and ease of setup, the Rift S offers the easiest way to get into VR gaming on PC, especially if you don't have a high-end PC that can handle 144Hz VR in the first place. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

- ✦ Inside-out tracking
- ✦ Attractive price point
- ✖ Includes touch controllers
- ✖ Lower fidelity than other sets

82

FIVE CAMERAS POSITIONED ON THE HEADSET ITSELF TRACK THE CONTROLLERS AND HEADSET

Massive crowds can prevent your PC from reaching 144fps.

FRAME PERFECT

Why is hitting 144fps so hard?

It's the Holy Grail of current gaming PCs – 144fps. You've splurged on a great gaming monitor, and paired it up with the fastest CPU and one of the best graphics cards money can buy. It's so smooth, so responsive, and you're ready to dominate your opponents with your superior skills – or at least your higher refresh rate. There's only one problem. Hitting 144fps in many games is difficult, and sometimes it's just flat out impossible. What gives?

It starts with a game's core design and features. Not to throw shade on consoles, but when several of the current generation gaming platforms cannot output at higher than 60Hz, it's only natural that the games played on them don't go out of their way to exceed 60fps – or even 30fps in some cases. When a game developer starts from that perspective, it can be very difficult to correct down the line. We've seen games like *Fallout 4* tie physics, movement speed, and more to framerate, often with undesirable results.

It's not just about targeting 30 or 60fps, however. Game complexity keeps increasing, and complexity means doing more calculations. Singleplayer games are typically a different experience than multiplayer games. The latter are inherently more competitive, which means higher fps can be more beneficial for the top players, and they often omit a bunch of things that can increase frametimes.

Think about games like *Counter-Strike*, *Overwatch*, *PUBG*, and *Fortnite* for example. There's very little in the way of AI or NPC logic that needs to happen. Most of the world is static and it's only the players running around, which means a lot less overhead and the potential for higher framerates.

Primarily singleplayer games are a different matter. Look at the environments of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, *Monster Hunter World*, and *Hitman 2*. There can be hundreds of creatures, NPCs, and other entities that need to be processed. That can bog down even the fastest CPUs.

Yes, the CPU and not the GPU. While the GPU is often considered the bottleneck for gaming performance, it's mostly about selecting the appropriate resolution and graphics quality. Turn down the settings and/or resolution far enough and the CPU becomes the limiting factor. And in complex games, that CPU limit can easily fall below 144fps. While a fast graphics card is often necessary to hit 144fps, an equally fast CPU may also be required.

This is shown by benchmarks for games such as *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, *Hitman 2* and *Monster Hunter World*. Running at 1080p and low or medium quality, there's excellent scaling in terms of CPU performance, but 144fps is still a difficult hurdle to clear. More importantly, the scaling comes mostly from clockspeed, with core and thread counts being less of a factor – especially moving beyond 6-core processors. That's because most games are still ruled by a



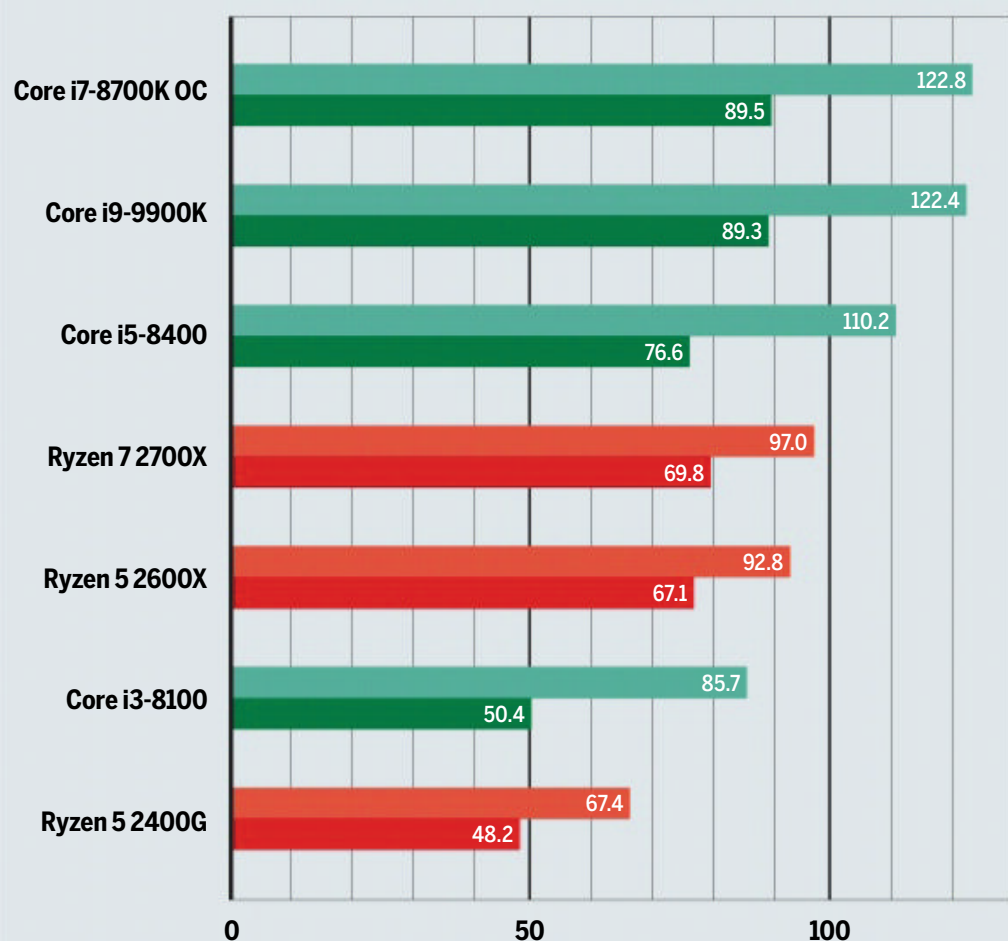
Everybody Hertz

Even if you can't maintain 144fps or more, 144Hz refresh rates are still awesome. The higher quality 144Hz displays also support G-Sync and FreeSync, which can help avoid noticeable stutters and tearing when you drop a bit below 144fps.

COST OF LIFE

Hitman 2 slams into a CPU bottleneck of around 122fps

RTX 2080 FPS AT 1920 X 1080 MEDIUM
Average 97 Percentile



single thread that does a lot of the work. Flip things around and think about each frame in terms of milliseconds. For a steady 60fps, each frame has at most 16.7ms of graphics and processing time. Jump to 144fps and each frame only has 6.9ms in which to get everything completed. But how much time does it actually take for each part of rendering a current frame? The answer is that it varies, and this leads into a discussion of Amdahl's Law.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

The gist of Amdahl's Law is that there are always portions of code that can't be parallelised. Imagine a hypothetical game where a single 4.0GHz Intel core takes 50ms to handle all of the calculations for each frame. That game would be limited to 20fps. If 75 per cent of the game code can be split into subtasks that run concurrently, but 25 per cent executes on a single thread, then regardless of how many CPU cores are available the best-case performance on a 4.0GHz Intel CPU would still only be 80fps.

Reworking the game code so that only 12.5 per cent executes on a single thread, maybe even five per cent, can help. Then 160fps or even 400fps is possible, but that takes developer time that might be better spent elsewhere – and of course CPUs don't have an infinite number of cores and threads. The point is there's a limited amount of time in which to handle all the processing of user input, game state, network code, graphics, sound, AI, etc, and more complex games inherently require more time.

Even with 4GHz and faster CPUs working in tandem with thousands of GPU cores, 6.9ms goes by quickly, and if you're looking at a 240Hz display running games at 240fps, that's only 4.2ms for each frame. If there's ever a hiccup along the way – eg, the game needs to load some objects or textures from storage, which could take anywhere from a few milliseconds on a fast SSD to perhaps tens of milliseconds on a hard drive – the game will stutter hard.

Let's put it a different way. Modern PCs can potentially chew through billions of calculations every second, but each calculation is extremely simple: $A + B$ for example. Handling a logic update for a single entity might require thousands or

tens of thousands of instructions, and all of those AI and entity updates are still only a small fraction of what has to happen each frame. Game developers need to balance everything to reach an acceptable level of performance, and on PCs that

can mean the ability to run on everything from an old 4-core Core 2 Quad or Athlon X4 up through a modern Ryzen or 9th Gen Core CPU, and GPUs ranging from Intel integrated graphics up through GeForce RTX 2080 Ti.

In short, hitting 144fps isn't just about hardware. It's about software and game design. If you've got your heart set on 144fps gaming, the best advice I can give is to remember that framerates aren't everything. For competitive multiplayer, drop the settings to minimum and see how the game runs, and potentially increase a few settings if there's wiggle room. ■

Jarred Walton

TOP: Online games such as *CS:GO* are relatively easy for your CPU to handle.

ABOVE: ...But *Assassin's Creed Odyssey's* NPCs create bottlenecks.

BELOW: Even if you can't max your framerate, 144Hz screens are great.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,070

MOTHERBOARD		B360M-DS3H Gigabyte £70 It lacks overclocking options, but the new B360 chipset is far cheaper than the Z370 and is perfect for this budget build.
PROCESSOR		Core i3-8100 Intel £108 A great processor for out-of-the-box gaming performance. Opt for the AMD Ryzen 1300X if you'd like to overclock.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Twin Fan Zotac £331 The 2060 is marginally pricier but noticeably better than our old 1060, making it the go-to budget GPU of the moment.
COOLER		Hyper 212 Evo CoolerMaster £26 Even a budget build can benefit from a good CPU cooler, letting you enjoy a quieter, cooler system.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 8GB (2x4GB) @2400MHz Corsair £38 DDR4 prices are still high, however this Corsair pair is a good value option.
POWER SUPPLY		CX-M Series CX550M Corsair £53 A UK price spike in our previous EVGA 500W pick opens the door for this quiet Corsair option.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £45 Crucial's SSD range is fantastic value and offers good performance, too. A 250GB drive can hold your OS and essential programs.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £37 One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and storage-hungry games.
CASE		Neos Bitfenix £40 The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.
DISPLAY		G2460PF AOC £199 This is the cheapest 144Hz gaming monitor you can buy, yet it still offers decent image quality, great performance and Freesync.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS Pro HyperX £69 A reliable and attractive board with no added frills from HyperX – plus it'll match that Stinger Core headset. Result.
MOUSE		Rival 110 SteelSeries £25 A great sensor, simple design and impressively low price make this a great entry-level gaming mouse.
HEADSET		Cloud Stinger HyperX £29 We love the HyperX Cloud, but at £70 it's too much for an entry-level system. The Cloud Stinger is the next best thing.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,561

MOTHERBOARD		Prime Z370 A II Asus £153 Great shielding, full of features, and featuring that – ahem – all important RGB lighting, this is a fine Asus board.
PROCESSOR		Core i5-8600K Intel £242 Six cores, six threads, good out-of-the-box clock speeds – and it's overclockable. No performance bottlenecks with this installed.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Twin Fan Zotac £312 Serious power from the 'just about affordable' end of Nvidia's new GPU fleet, and it's ray tracing-ready too.
COOLER		Hydro Series H55 Quiet Edition Corsair £55 Tidy and quiet, the H55 will unlock our CPU's overclocking potential and look good through your case window while it does so.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB (2x8GB) @2666 Corsair £80 16GB is the minimum amount of RAM we'd recommend for a system of this calibre.
POWER SUPPLY		CX 650W Corsair £65 It may not feature fancy modular design, but Corsair's reliable CX 650 is cheap enough to accommodate for our other part picks.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £45 This is still our SSD of choice. We've kept the capacity the same as our cheaper build, but upgrading to 500GB would be ideal.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £37 SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you will need.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £72 The clean lines, intuitive build features and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our mid-range case of choice.
DISPLAY		Optix MAG271CR MSI £270 Curved, stylish, and offering 144Hz refresh rates, our MSI monitor pick suits pros and would-be pros alike.
KEYBOARD		One Ducky £90 A lesser known keyboard brand with a great rep among mechanical switch nerds. Ducky delivers the goods with the one.
MOUSE		G502 Proteus Spectrum Logitech £60 Logitech's revered G502 is comfortable, adjustable, and precise. Also 'Proteus Spectrum' sounds like a <i>Halo</i> map.
HEADSET		HyperX Cloud Kingston £80 Despite the budget price, we recommend this headset. There's simply nothing better for the money.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,699

MOTHERBOARD



Strix X470-F Gaming

Asus **£180**

Get the most from the new AMD Ryzen 2700X with this matching X470 motherboard that's packed with features.

PROCESSOR



Ryzen 7 2700X

AMD **£279**

Easy to overclock and with huge performance out of the box, AMD's new flagship CPU is the one to go for.

GRAPHICS CARD

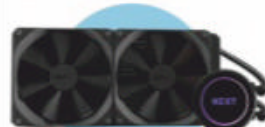


GeForce RTX 2080Ti Black Edition

EVGA **£1,045**

EVGA's custom design is considerably cheaper than Nvidia's reference card, and with great cooling.

COOLER



Kraken X62

NZXT **£90**

The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY



Ripjaws V 32GB @3200

G.Skill **£186**

G.Skill is always a safe bet for lightning fast RAM, and if you can do without the RGB frills this 2x16GB set will treat you right.

POWER SUPPLY



HX750i 80 Plus Platinum

Corsair **£148**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD



970 Evo 500GB M.2 PCIe SSD

Samsung **£108**

Samsung's newest NVMe SSDs push performance to new heights and cost the same as the previous 960 range.

HDD



WD Blue 4TB

Western Digital **£92**

With a large boot SSD, there's little need for a large, cheap SSD. Instead we've opted for a huge 4TB hard drive for all your bulk data.

CASE



Enthoo Evolv ATX TG

Phanteks **£135**

The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.

DISPLAY



AW3418DW

Alienware **£998**

34 inches of curved, beautifully presented 120Hz display with the added benefits of G-Sync. One for aesthetes and athletes alike.

KEYBOARD



K70 LUX RGB

Corsair **£115**

Even when money is no object it's hard to argue against Corsair's latest K70. A no-fuss, solid piece of aluminium craftsmanship.

MOUSE



Mamba Elite

Razer **£63**

A beautiful design, comfortable shape and outstanding performance make this a brilliant high-end gaming mouse.

HEADSET



Arctis Pro Wireless

SteelSeries **£260**

The top range model in SteelSeries' Arctis range offers it all – swappable batteries, killer tone, handy controls and much more.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

Rescuing Ford Schick from the lab.



“Ion Storm’s pioneering immersive sim remains eminently playable”

Almost 20 years later, **DEUS EX** is still one of the best games on PC

Every couple of years I like to remind myself why *Deus Ex* is my favourite game. Most PC games I loved in the late '90s haven't held up that well, but Ion Storm's pioneering immersive sim remains eminently playable. It's also a relic of a time when videogames were much, much bigger, to a degree you just couldn't match with the production values and visual fidelity expected of modern games.

Mankind Divided had one hyper-detailed city, Prague, but in the original game you visit New York City, Hong Kong, Paris, and a dozen other locations including Area 51, a submarine base, and an airport. It's

ANDY KELLY



THIS MONTH
Infiltrated a top secret government facility.

ALSO PLAYED
Rage 2

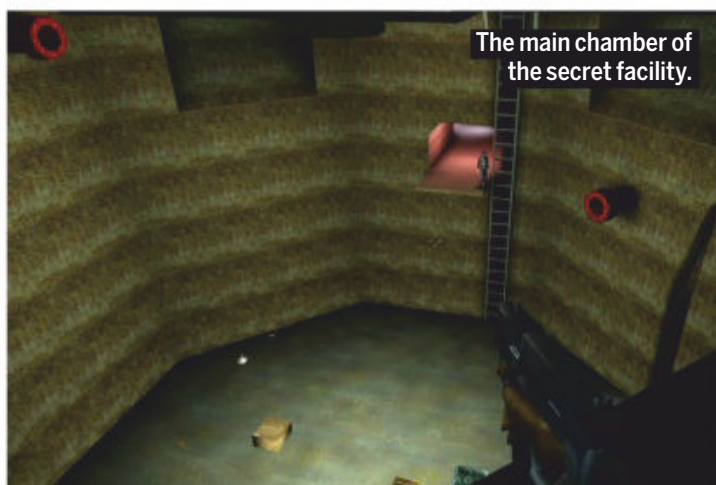
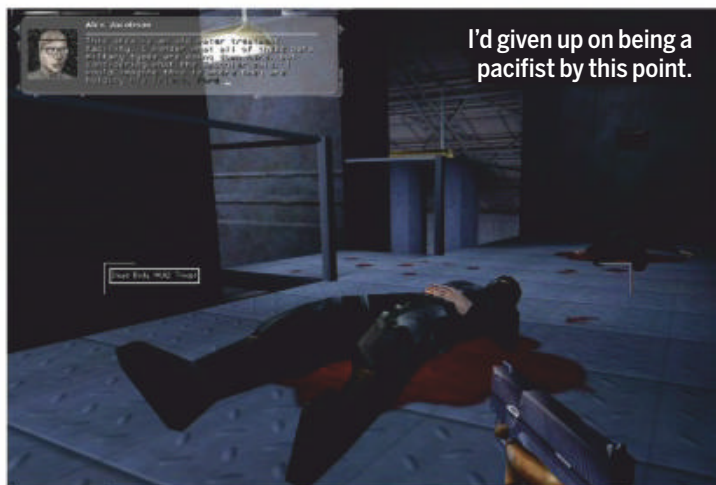
an irresponsibly huge game, and some of it is even optional. Today's games are terrified that you'll lose interest or miss something, but early in *Deus Ex*, during your first visit to Hell's Kitchen, it's possible to skip a massive chunk of the level.

A character called Smuggler is holed up in the sewers, protected by a network of mines, turrets, and security bots. If you manage to sneak or hack your way around them you

can pick up a mission to rescue his friend, Ford Schick, who has been captured by an unknown force hiding out in a secret facility beneath the city. The facility is protected by even more traps and security systems than Smuggler's hideout, and there are multiple ways to infiltrate the place.

I remember visiting this location the first time I played *Deus Ex* and being baffled by its existence, and why it was being guarded by scary-looking guards in black armour. Now I understand that these are

MAJESTIC 12 IS PUMPING NEW YORK'S WATER SYSTEM FULL OF CHLORINE



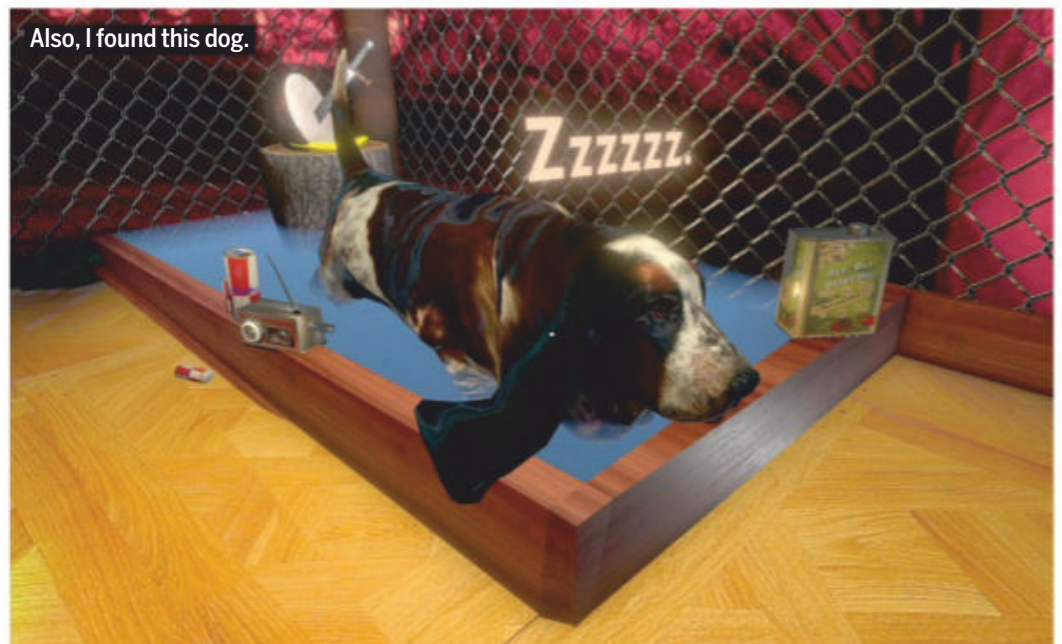
Majestic 12 troops, encountered long before they're officially introduced in the story. And the underground facility is enormous, even having its own self-contained storyline, which is uncovered by talking to Schick, hacking computers, and reading lost datapads. You don't have to rescue Schick, of course. This is *Deus Ex* after all. But if you do, Smuggler will lower the prices of the items he sells.

Exploring the facility, JC Denton learns that Majestic 12 is pumping New York's water system full of chlorine in order to justify rationing. And that the lab is being used to test the manufactured Grey Death virus.

EX MARKS THE SPOT

Deus Ex is, let's be honest, a pretty hideous game. It didn't even look that good back in 1999. But discoveries like this, which reward inquisitive players for poking around in every corner of the map, make its blocky, muddy world a delight to explore.

I've reached Hong Kong in my replay, which is a dramatic tonal shift from the bleak streets of New York City – and there are even more optional missions and locations to discover there too. One day I might return to *Deus Ex* and find it too old and creaky to enjoy, but it hasn't happened yet – and the game is almost 20 years old at this point. Every year it makes it into our top 100 list, and rightly so. There's something timeless about *Deus Ex*. Long may it reign. ■



“I think they might be the bad guys”

Paying a visit to **THE NORWOOD SUITE**

PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH
Forgot to check in.

ALSO PLAYED
Baba is You, Destiny 2

I've been dropped off at The Hotel Norwood. Why? I'm not sure. It appears to be as part of some mysterious scheme that I've not been made aware of. Still, I do have a coupon for a free room, so what the hell. I walk the meandering path past arguing unicyclists, a giant apple and a lonely turtle. Finally, near the hotel car park, I meet a couple of corporate suits from the Modulo group. They're plotting to buy the hotel. I think they might be the bad guys.

They demand I fetch a six-pack of Blue Moose energy drink. Coincidentally, as part of a sponsorship program, each guest is handed a free pack upon check-in. I smell a quest. Instead I get a cascading series of menial tasks.

Problem #1: I need to register my voucher before I can check in and claim my Blue Moose. I find the computer in a corner of the reception area and, after fiddling with some plugs, turn it on. Problem #2: the wi-fi is down. I tell reception and

they explain that the router is playing up again. It's in the library. I should go and reset it.

TURTLE IN A PICKLE

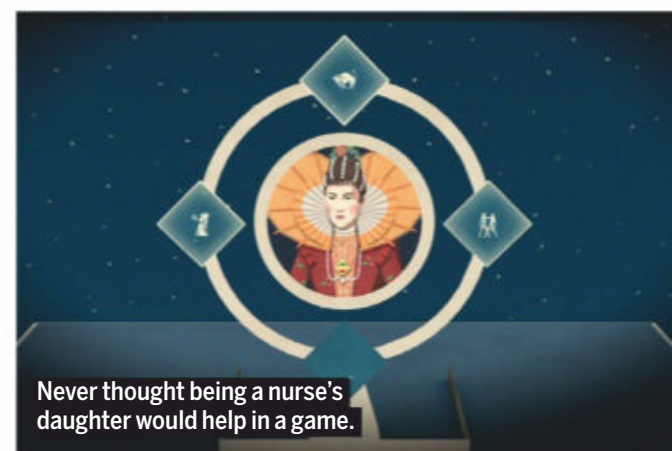
I go to the library. I reset the router. But on my way back I overhear a conversation between two members of staff. One, the chef, is being trounced in a game of Zo – a boardgame that appears to involve a chess board and a series of multicoloured building blocks.

I could ignore them, but – in a game full of strange, funky musical riffs – I'm particularly enjoying the song that's playing on the radio next to them. And so I'm roped into another quest: searching the library for a Zo strategy guide that might rescue the chef from imminent defeat.

I find the guide upstairs. The chef's victory now assured, he hands me the key to his room and asks me to fetch his jar of pickles. Sure, man, whatever.

When I enter his room, I find the pickles marinating in tragedy, the jar smashed on the floor. Still, the room is pretty interesting. There are lots of buttons and switches. I flip a lever and a secret door opens. I press a button and a terrarium rises to the ceiling. The turtle inside crawls into a food delivery pipe.

This quest for pickles has gone very wrong. I leave, quickly. A businesswoman asks me to make a sandwich. Here we go again. ■



“I want to flip my chair and shout at them to tell me about their bloating”

When healing the sick in **ASTROLOGASTER**, nothing is true, everything's permitted

Astrologaster was described to me as “sort of a Jane Austen visual novel”. Superficially it's an odd comparison - Astrologaster is set in the Elizabethan era and the visual aspect of the novel is more about how it's designed to look like a pop-up book - but it gives a good sense of the romantic entanglements and human drama contained within. Plus it taught me more than how a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

Here, Simon Forman consults the stars - i.e. me - to diagnose his patients' diseases and solve problems. This approach is a wonderful examination of both the strange cures that were common in 16th century England and the fact that you can't heal every malady with bed rest and herbs. Astrologaster wastes no time diving into psychological causes of illnesses, such as an unhappy marriage. Forman also consults the stars on crises of faith and neighbourly squabbles. These cases I can only solve by making informed guesses.

I'm into astrology, I read my

▶ MALINDY HETFELD



THIS MONTH
Helped Londoners with ailments big and small.

ALSO PLAYED
Observation

horoscope and I know that reading it may do nothing more than set up a self-fulfilling prophecy, but *being* the horoscope really drives home the absurdity of the stars holding a solution for people's individual problems. Astrologaster is like a detective game where you build your understanding out of the smallest hints. It makes me want to be the bad cop, bash my fists on the table in front of a patient, flip my chair and shout at them to tell me about their bloating.

COITUS POST CONSULTATIO

I feel a deep appreciation for any GPs who can diagnose a patient the way

IT MAKES ME WANT TO BE THE BAD COP, BASH MY FISTS ON THE TABLE

my patients in Astrologaster expect me to - vaguely pointing at a part of their body and going “it hurts here”. I enjoy the realistically awkward dance between a doctor and patients who shy away from describing their pus-filled inner workings, and Astrologaster's voice acting delivers the curious pompousness of each “prithee” and “full sorry” better than text on a screen could.

The best thing about Astrologaster isn't what I do in it, but what it taught me. This game made me want to know more about Jesuit priests and 16th century immigrants, and its magnificently rude choir reminded me of my love of English madrigals.

I also keep thinking about how Astrologaster has 14 characters. 14! I've recently been figuring out what writing a game would look like, and the effort that goes into creating 14 distinct humans is awe-inspiring.

You'll need that cast to fulfil the game's end goal of collecting enough letters of approval to become a real doctor, but how to get that approval is a pretty opaque process. Do patients approve because I told them the right thing or because it was what they wanted to hear? Maybe it doesn't matter all that much, as long as I manage to soothe them. ■

“You realise that nothing can beat you in this very difficult videogame”

From tantrums to triumph in the duels of **SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE**

I'm not a From Software kind of guy. I've never finished a From game, and I didn't think I ever would. So how come I ended up finishing *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*, widely considered its hardest game yet, twice? I've been on a stranger journey with this game than perhaps any other, uninstalling it, screaming “this is bullshit” at an enemy who in retrospect, was very easy, and ultimately revering *Sekiro* as a masterpiece.

The key moment in any player's run in *Sekiro* is a boss fight with Genichiro Ashina, a swordsman who slices your character's arm off in the opening scene of the game. The fight is atop Ashina Castle, as you're surrounded by mountains and valleys on three sides – it's scenic, and the long climb up there in and around the castle is a dramatic, complicated journey full of combat encounters. Genichiro is the cherry on the cake.

This fight is transformative. What starts as a duel you can't possibly win breaks you, over and over again, until you learn to block his absurd sword flurries. This is where you go from

SAMUEL ROBERTS



THIS MONTH
Learned the way
of the blade.

ALSO PLAYED
Sea of Thieves,
Vermintide 2

being on the back foot in *Sekiro* to finally understanding. You realise that nothing can beat you in this very difficult videogame, as long as you're willing to suffer and learn. For me, this all happened in one long night – a maybe four or five hour session. If I hadn't triumphed over Genichiro that night (I screamed “yes!” at my computer), I might have uninstalled the game again and never returned.

Sekiro has taken me out of my comfort zone, of the likes of *Assassin's Creed* or the last *God of War* game on PS4, where I was playing for easy pleasure rather than looking to be biffed by dickheads

I GOT SO INTO IT THAT I BEGAN TO ENVISION ITS ENEMIES RUNNING AT ME IN MY SLEEP

over and over again. If anything, *Sekiro* has taught me that being competitive with myself is not a good part of my personality – I got so into it that I began to envision its enemies running at me in my sleep. I dreamt about Genichiro trying to stab me, and woke up as I imagined countering him. I'm an idiot.

That's just the unhealthy relationship that I have forged with *Sekiro*, though. And it's not the only connection that I have formed as a result of this game. I've built up a kind of Twitter micro community around my tweets about overcoming *Sekiro* bosses. That's been a true pleasure, to learn there's a whole world of nice people who love these games and aren't just children on forums barking “git gud”.

LEVELLING UP SKILLS

Well, I did git gud. I then beat *Sekiro* on New Game Plus with harder enemies while barely breaking a sweat – so complete is my knowledge of how its enemies work. I'm not prepared to ring the in-game bell that makes it really hard, or anything. I'm just happy knowing I went from being an idiot swinging a sword to a master of one-on-one combat. ■



This image captures my fulfilment at having no more enemies to kill in *Sekiro*.



I love and hate what Genichiro has done to me.

Impressive, Shinobi of the Divine Heir.



MINECRAFT

Breaking down Mojang's biggest ever update. *By Matt Elliott*

Minecraft's Village & Pillage update is the biggest the game has ever had. It overhauls how villages work, adds a host of new blocks, and brings a new raid system that acts as a high-level combat encounter. But first, let's talk about grass.

Bamboo is one of the big new features. Bamboo is a useful addition that can be found in jungles and in two new biomes: bamboo jungle and bamboo jungle hills. You can chop it down instantly by hitting it with a sword and it can be combined with string to make scaffolding – a quick, easily destructible building aid you can use to clamber around your mighty constructions.

Bamboo without pandas would be heresy. These stout, pointless bears have different personality types: lazy, worried, playful, aggressive, and so on. You can tell what type they are from their appearance, and, more adorably, their behaviour. Lazy pandas lay about on their backs, playful pandas roll, and worried pandas have panic attacks during

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Out now

DEVELOPER
Mojang

PUBLISHER
Mojang/Microsoft

LINK
minecraft.net

thunderstorms. No, really. Stray cats have also been added. They're distinct from ocelots, which can no longer be tamed. They'll sleep on your bed, bring you 'gifts' in the morning like chicken and rotting flesh – thanks, cat! – and scare away phantoms by hissing at them. Canines also get some love. Tamed dogs will now attack mobs you shoot with projectiles, like you're a hunter in *World of Warcraft*. Foxes are in, too. And finally, there's the Ravager. This massively powerful hostile mob has 50 hearts and looks like the offspring of an angry table that's had sex with a bull.

It's not just about new mobs, though. Everything about the way villages are generated has changed, as has the way you interact with them as a player. The aesthetics of each village now alter depending on the biome – climate and available

resources make a difference. The biggest surprise, however, is with professions. Villagers now learn skills from point of interest blocks. These spawn in villages and assign trades to jobless villagers who interact with them. The smoker block, for example, will turn a villager into a butcher. You can also interact with most of these new blocks when crafting. Smokers, for example, cook food twice as fast as furnaces... somehow.

The new villages are so good, in fact, there's an entirely new type of -illager created just to exploit them. Pillagers spawn in patrols across the world and in large outpost towers. If you kill a pillager captain – the guys with banners on their backs – you'll get flagged with the 'bad omen' debuff. While this is active, you'll trigger a raid when you enter a village. Once this begins, the village will get attacked by waves of enemies: pillagers, standard villagers, witches,



BAMBOO WITHOUT PANDAS WOULD BE HERESY

and so on. If you manage to beat off all the attackers, you're treated to a firework display and a new effect, called Hero of the Village. This lowers the price of trades and causes villagers to occasionally throw items at you. An unconventional way of saying thank you, perhaps, but then it is your fault the hordes arrived – maybe you deserve that chop to the head. Pillagers in *Minecraft* also come armed with the best weapon ever to be removed from the *Elder Scrolls* games – crossbows.

WITH BELLS ON

Finally, we've got all those lovely new blocks. There are too many to list here, but there are some standouts. These include the campfire, a cosy light source, perfect for telling ghost stories, which also prevents flames from spreading. Campfires also create smoke pillars. There's also a bell, which is more exciting than it sounds. You can right click these or shoot them to warn villagers of impending danger, and they'll run inside and hide. Useful when the raids begin. Yes, the raids you caused. You monster. ■

BUILDING CAREERS *New blocks with specific jobs*



BLAST FURNACE
Smelts ore twice as fast as an ordinary furnace, and acts as the job block for the armourer job.



CARTOGRAPHY TABLE
Used for cloning, zooming, and expanding the maps.



COMPOSTER
This block rapidly generates bone meal, and turns villagers into farmers.



FLETCHING TABLE
One of two blocks with no crafting abilities. Villagers become fletchers.



GRINDSTONE
Combines damaged items to increase their durability and turns villagers into weaponsmiths.



LECTERN
Used to hold books that players can read together. How nice! Also generates librarians.



LOOM
Used to recreate banner patterns. Villagers become shepherds when they interact with it.



SMITHING TABLE
This one doesn't do anything yet, apart from creating toolsmiths.



SMOKER
Cooks food twice as fast as a furnace, which is nonsense. Also turns villagers into butchers.



STONE CUTTER
Basically a more rugged version of the crafting table. It turns villagers into stone masons.

Wandering traders now pop up in every world.



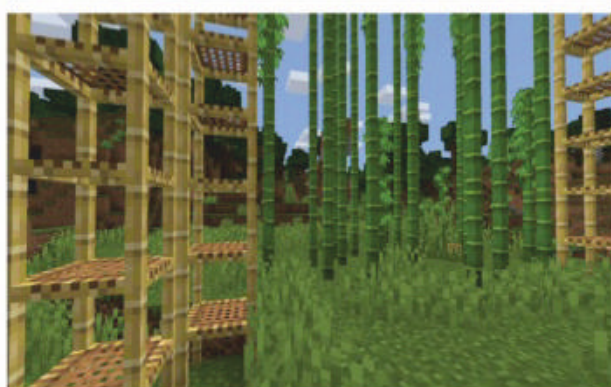
Feel rugged by roasting your chops on a campfire.



No mercy for those outside Panda Gang. Only death.



Many new blocks spawn jobs for unemployed villagers.



Gregory couldn't shake the feeling he was being followed.

SIMULATORS

The best sims you can play on PC right now. *By Andy Kelly*

Although a few have appeared on consoles, PC is historically the home of the simulator. As such there's a huge amount of choice, from driving heavy goods vehicles

and subway trains, to collecting garbage and flying spaceships. It's a crowded but worthwhile genre, with a sim to fit every taste. If you don't know where to start, I've gathered up some of the best sims available today.



START HERE

EURO TRUCK SIMULATOR 2

Drive a truck and deliver goods around a vast, interconnected replica of Europe. Few simulators are as polished and fun as this, and you'll be surprised how hypnotic such a seemingly mundane job can be.

The map is enormous and each country has its own distinctive look and feel, making long drives feel like a real journey.

From the French countryside to the mountains of Norway, this is the greatest road trip on PC.

THE CLASSIC

STAR WARS: TIE FIGHTER

→ Yeah, *Star Wars: X-Wing* is cool too, but fighting for the Empire is just so much more fun. Set just after the Battle of Hoth, this classic space sim sees you piloting the titular Imperial fighter, engaging in battles, completing missions, and following a surprisingly fun story. It's showing its age, but it's much easier to play than *X-Wing* thanks to the introduction of a HUD that handily displays your orientation relative to your target.



GO BACK IN TIME

OMSI 2

→ Have you ever wanted to drive a bus around the streets of Spandau, Germany in the late '80s and early '90s? Well dream no more, because *OMSI 2* simulates exactly that. Get behind the wheel of a MAN NG272 bus, pick up passengers, navigate traffic, and stick to a timetable accurate to the period. It's weird, sure, but *OMSI* is a quality sim, faithfully recreating the look, feel, and sound of a creaky old city bus.

CHALLENGE YOURSELF

WORLD OF SUBWAYS 3: LONDON UNDERGROUND

→ If you've ever seen a subway train and thought it looked like a cushy job, well, try playing the third *World of Subways* sim. Operating these ancient, rattling trains is incredibly complicated, and driving them without massively overshooting a station requires an immense amount of concentration and foresight. Throw in a rigid timetable and you have one of the toughest sims on PC. I'll never underestimate a Tube driver ever again.

AVOID THIS

GOAT SIMULATOR

There's a whole genre of comedy games on Steam based around 'simulating' something unlikely: a slice of bread in *I Am Bread*, a clumsy surgeon in *Surgeon Simulator*, and so on. Some of them are funny, in short bursts, sometimes, but *Goat Simulator* is just a bad game. Once the initial novelty of flinging a floppy goat around a series of physics playgrounds wears off, which takes about ten minutes, the fun is over.



LEAVE EARTH BEHIND

ELITE DANGEROUS

→ With a flight stick and throttle, *Elite* is one of the most enjoyable sims you can play on PC. The ships all feel fantastic to fly, whether it's a nippy fighter or a chunky hauler. The space combat is exciting, and even something as mundane as docking feels tactile and satisfying. It's almost as good with a controller or mouse and keyboard, and there's a huge amount to do in the game.

GO TO WAR

IL-2 STURMOVIK: CLIFFS OF DOVER

→ If you watched *Dunkirk* and fancied taking part in those amazing Spitfire dogfights, this sim captures the excitement brilliantly. Set during the Battle of Britain, it features 20 aircraft, a realistic flight simulation, and a massive map covering the entire southeast of England, including London, and parts of France and Belgium. Make sure you play the Blitz Edition on Steam, a massive overhaul co-developed by fans of the series.



STRANGER THINGS

Some of the weirder sims



1 VISCERA CLEANUP DETAIL

Ever wondered who cleans up all the mess after you've rampaged through a level in a first-person shooter? This game lets you step into their rubber boots, cleaning up the blood, gibbs, and chaos left behind.



2 GARBAGE TRUCK SIMULATOR

What I love about PC gaming is how stuff like this can exist. I mean, it isn't a great simulator, but what other platform lets you step into the world of a garbage collector? Escapism can take many forms.



3 HOUSE FLIPPER

Buy houses, renovate them, sell them for a profit. That's the core loop of this weird, fun sim, but there's a twist: you have to do it all yourself. Repairs, interior design, cleaning up... you have to handle it all alone.



PURIST'S CHOICE

DCS: A-10C WARTHOG

This hardcore flight simulator lets you fly an authentic replica of a close air support attack aircraft used by the US Air Force. The simulation is one of the most realistic on PC, with flight dynamics, avionics, sensors, and systems all faithfully recreated. And if you want to take it to the next level, Thrustmaster's infamous Warthog HOTAS, which is made of weighty metal (and extremely expensive), is the Ferrari of flight sticks.



PICKING EVERY FIGHT IN MIRROR'S EDGE

PART II

Who's disarming who in
DICE's reluctant shooter?

By Jeremy Peel

THE RULES

1 Whenever somebody attacks Faith, fight back.

2 Take every possible opportunity to use the guns.

3 Only run once all other options have been exhausted.

There's a decommissioned nuclear bunker just outside York where the walls are painted in calming tones – designed to help its occupants keep their heads as they carried out essential logistics in the days and weeks after a hypothetical strike.

It seems like wishful thinking to hope that a nice shade of paint might make the difference against the weight of the world's end. Then again, colour associations are strong and laden with meaning. When I think of *Mirror's Edge*, I tend to remember the gleaming whites and deep blues – the aspects of its palette I associate with serenity and freedom under an open sky. Now that I'm playing through it again as a killer, I'm noticing a whole other part of the colour wheel – the angry oranges and block reds that kick in with greater frequency as I punch my way through to the middle of the campaign.

As Faith, I'm a runner who lives in the gaps left by The City's surveillance society, making highways of its roofspaces and maintenance shafts. But the cop gauntlet of our last instalment made it clear

that something has changed – power in The City is shifting, and Faith's outsider status is in flux.

In fact, right now I'm about as inside as it's possible to be, in the offices of Robert Pope & Associates. Pope is a mayoral candidate running on an anti-surveillance platform, which might be why his building is full of frosted glass windows, as opposed to the transparent panes found everywhere else. I'm on the 26th floor, Marketing. The carpets are thin and the walls are adorned with TVs, in places nobody would stop to watch them.

FIGHTING WITH MY FAMILY

I'm here because police chatter suggests Faith's sister Kate – a cop – has been involved in a violent incident. Sure enough, we find her in Pope's corner office. The would-be mayor sits at his desk overlooking the whole city, but he's not enjoying the view. Blood pours from his head, and Kate stands over him. Apparently this sort of thing runs in the family. Kate says she's been set up, and a piece of paper on Pope's desk points to an "Icarus", but there's nothing to be done about it right now. Sis is going to jail, and I need to get out of here. As I make my way out, SWAT boots flatten the carpet thinner still. "You are surrounded," a voice bellows. "Do not attempt to exit the building." My new philosophy dictates a third way, however: before I leave, I have to try and fight them.

A dozen militarised policemen have the entire floor covered with assault rifles. If I'm going to stand a chance of beating them, I have to get at their weapons. Thankfully, the influence of *The Matrix* lies heavy over *Mirror's Edge*, like an oversized trench coat. Running generates 'reaction time' – and when I press X, I can cash it in for a few seconds of slo-mo. That'll make it far easier to exploit the tiny window of opportunity I get to grab a gun at close range before it makes contact with my face.

After several attempts, I perfect the combo – sliding beneath the bullets of the nearest cop, straightening up to receive a rifle butt to the chin, then wrenching the weapon away at the last possible moment. I turn the gun triumphantly on its owners, and – click. Click, click, click. Nothing happens. Other people's bullets fill the air. My slo-mo is spent, I can't arm myself, and there's absolutely

no way I can confiscate 11 more rifles in a row. It's time to turn to my third rule and run.

Luckily this is an office built to impress – lots of light, and lots of openings. I slip through an indoor window into Accounting, and take the mezzanine floor up to the vents. The cops fill those with light,

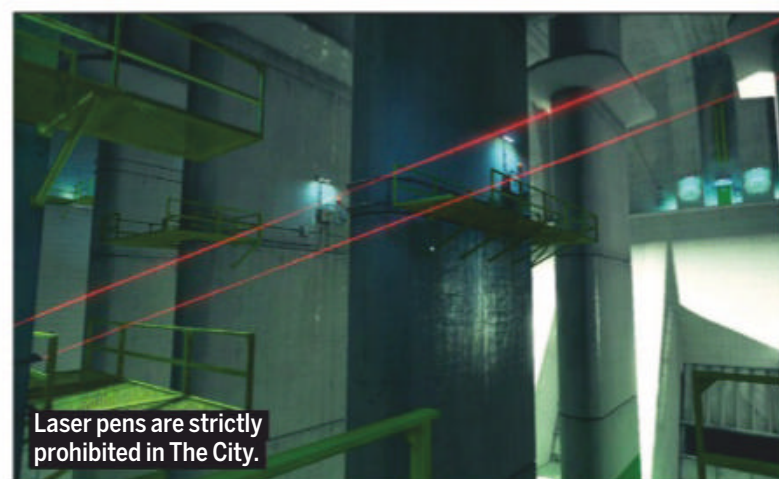
too, opening new holes in the metal beneath my feet. It's a hurried retreat – my escape is accompanied by a soundtrack of dinging lifts, the thud of doors barged open, and once I make it to the building's exterior, the wop-wop-wop of a helicopter's propeller.

After an eternity of fire escape chicanery, I drop down into an enclosed urban garden. In the stark colour scheme, even the plants are painted an artificial white, like a reverse Alice in Wonderland. I take the nearest door into the City Eye news station, and spot three SWAT cops standing at the far end of a corridor. I can't use their rifles, but I do prefer these odds. The chopper's guns can't hit me here, and nobody else is following. The corridor glistens with red paint. I veer right, pushing Faith's light frame over a chain link fence into the parallel maintenance area. Here I can close the gap between me and the cops without eating all their bullets.

I slide-kick the cop at the rear, transferring all my momentum into his legs and taking his weapon when he doubles over. The chamber's empty, so I turn tail and zigzag back down the corridor, ping-ponging between the walls to keep safe. Even playing the game in this counter-intuitive fashion, speed is my armour.

With each small success comes a dose of panic. I'm far from mastery, and with that first downed cop comes the mounting pressure to pull it off again, and again, until the

POWER IN THE CITY IS SHIFTING, AND FAITH'S OUTSIDER STATUS IS IN FLUX





» encounter's over. So it happens that I don't kick the second cop in the head as intended, but push the wrong buttons and spin around in mid-air, falling flat on my arse.

FAITH IN ACTION

While the scene reloads, I start looking up YouTube videos with names like "*Mirror's Edge* All Disarms". I feel like Neo, uploading martial arts directly into my brain. Suddenly, I know how to expose an enemy's back by chaining a wall-run into a kick, granting me a moment free from gunfire to disarm them. To make it happen, though, I have to unlearn *Titanfall 2*.

In *Respawn's* game you can push leisurely off a wall like a swimmer, redirecting yourself as needed. But in *Mirror's Edge* you ricochet like a bullet. Your point of entrance determines your angle of exit, and that kick has to happen near-instantly if it's going to connect.

Once I get it right, the second cop falls this way. The third I meet unexpectedly in a doorway as we both hurtle around the corner in opposite directions. Startled, I smack him so hard he ragdolls into the wall opposite. His jelly-limbs wobble gently under his shoulderpads. If it's any consolation to him, I'm shaking too.

On comms, Merc is still troubled by Pope's death, but in my journey he's just one body among many. Following my handler's directions, I stride out across the hideous yellow-and-bonsai-tree decor of the journalists' office, where news of Pope's murder already rings from every screen, and pick up speed as I head out to Centurion Plaza. Which doesn't sound authoritarian at all.

"Blues ahead of you," Merc warns. "One at a time, remember what I told you." These are street cops, much less armoured than their SWAT equivalents, and the game wants me to take them out. I jog to meet the first, and he brings his pistol down towards my head. I duck out the way, hitting the prompt at the right time to use his own momentum against him, twisting an arm up behind his head. I'd read him his rights, but I'm not sure they have those here anymore.

This gun has bullets in it. I wave it around the plaza and power up the wide steps of the train station – a grand

KEEPING THE FAITH *The family stories that survived Catalyst's reboot*



ERIKA

Poor mummy Connors doesn't live to see any version of *Mirror's Edge*. Her death is what splits her daughters.



ABRAHAM/MARTIN

Faith's dad is a campaigner who either died with Erika or survived her to become an alcoholic.



FAITH

Protagonist Faith is headstrong and impulsive, shaped by early family tragedy and a runner father figure.



KATE

Kate believes in improving The City. Even after her reinvention for *Catalyst*, she represents Faith's philosophical opposite.

facade celebrating this society with concrete brutalism and bright orange flags. This is my first opportunity to bring firepower to bear against the SWAT, however piddly. I take clumsy potshots at those I can see standing at a roadblock, and watch one fall before making my escape. For the first time since starting this playthrough I feel powerful, and at least somewhat in control.

SNIPING IN THE SEWERS

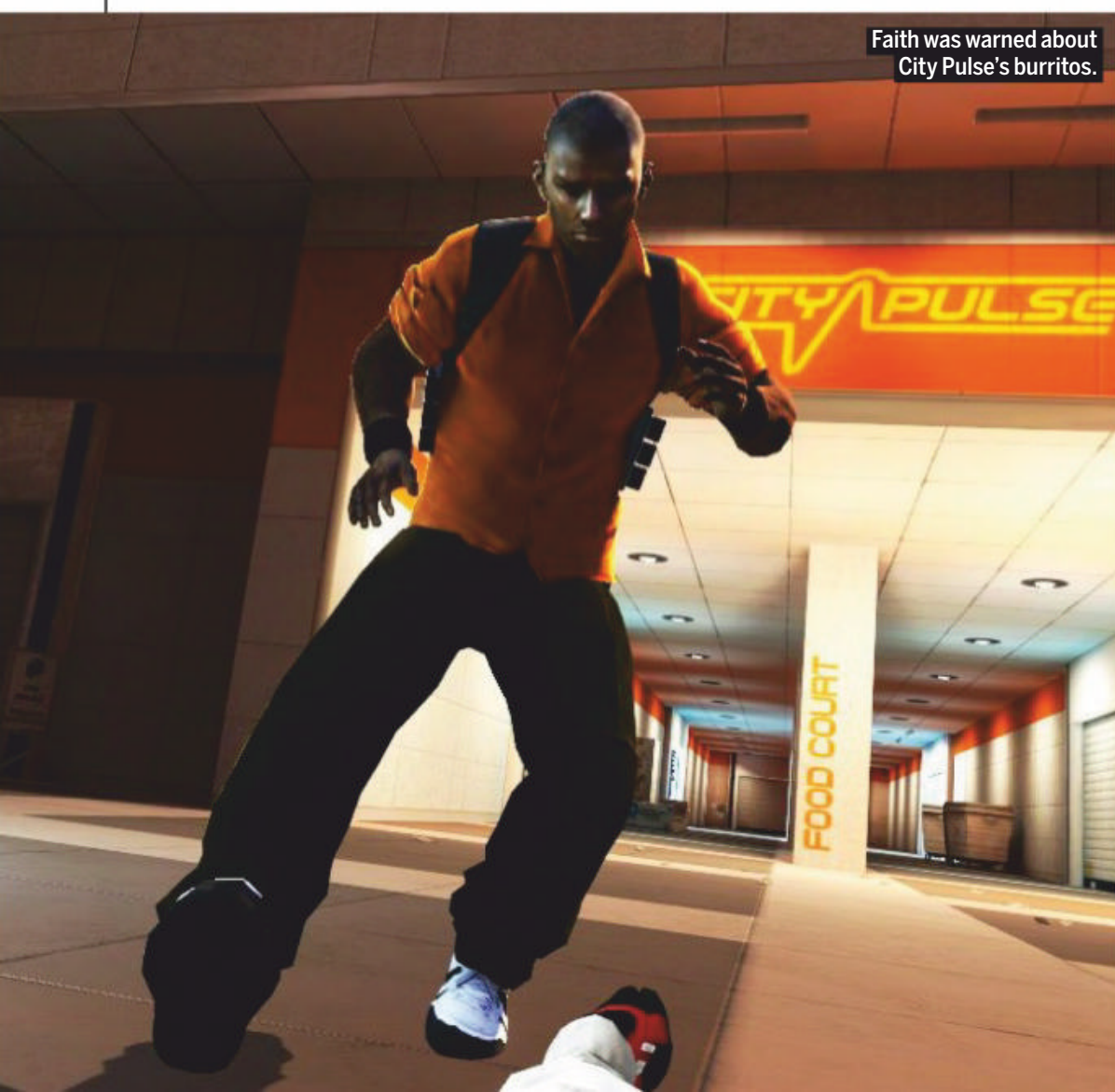
My next assignment sends me down a gaping storm drain, which looks like the Sarlacc's pit after a deep clean. I'm looking for an old runner acquaintance named Jackknife, who might know more about Icarus than we do, which isn't hard.

Down here the colour switches to a damp shade of seaweed, the pace slows for challenging jumps, and a low rumble provides ambience – the constant bass note of vast underground spaces. "Keep going," warns Merc. "Don't think those Blues won't come down here."

Sure enough, a sniper team has set up ahead. Their sights bob gently on a green sea of gangways as I climb, promising serious hardware if I can only reach it. Eventually, by leaping between tall concrete pillars, I get close enough to disarm a marksman – but make the mistake of kicking him in the chest as I hop over a gap. He stumbles, and I plunge straight downward, making a soggy surface far soggier. Momentum really is life and death in *Mirror's Edge*.

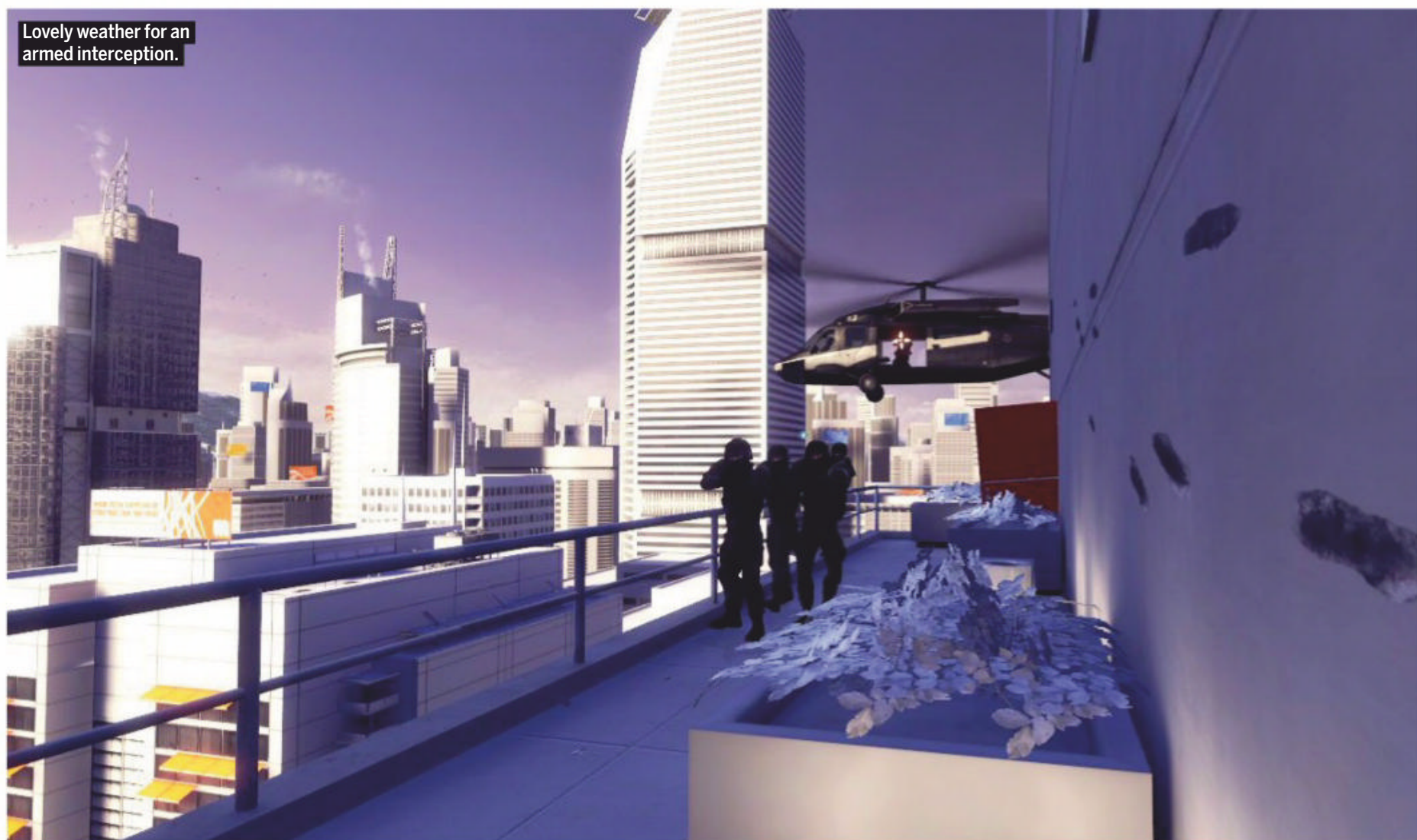
On the second try, with the help of slo-mo and a rain-slick wall, I yank the weapon from his grip. It looks

Faith was warned about City Pulse's burritos.



You never want to be somebody highlighted in red.

Lovely weather for an armed interception.



huge against the game's empty HUD, a weighty presence in Faith's hands. And so it proves. Once I've dispatched the snipers positioned on the opposite side of the drain, I make to jump to the next platform, but the rifle won't let me. With this albatross pulling me down, I can't even mount the first springboard. I'll have to leave it here.

Exeunt through the emergency overflow gate, pursued by police.

I make my way up the drain to ground level, by pipe and by crane. It's the only place the game's platforming rhythm has matched the stuttering, fumbling one I've chosen for myself by embracing combat. So when I emerge on the surface and find a riot squad waiting for me, it feels like a natural part of the game's flow.

Armed with shotguns and wearing shoulder pads that suggest their mums have dressed them for roller skating, the riot cops strike less terrifying figures than the SWAT. I

can take them. But I'll need to pick them off – and more importantly, pick the guns from their unconscious bodies.

Finally, something with a kick. There's no *Doom*-style boom here – instead the shotgun comes over like a stapler produced by Skrillex. But it sends the riot guys flying backward, and it's a relief to see somebody other than me getting some serious air for once.

Afterwards, though, lugging the gun around reduces Faith to a goofy plod. And my very next move requires a four part jump across parked lorries over a barbed wire fence. Then I realise: that's no coincidence. Like the platform in the storm

drain, this sequence is designed to disarm me, just as I've been disarming cops all over town.

At last, *Mirror's Edge* is letting me at the big guns. But it's still trying to control where and how I use its weapons, and it remains to be seen whether I can break free. ■

I EMERGE ON THE SURFACE AND FIND A RIOT SQUAD WAITING FOR ME



The sniper rifle is as long as its appearance is short.





DUNE 2000

Celebrating Westwood Studios' forgotten RTS. *By John Strike*

I imagine a universe where Patrick Stewart charges into battle holding a pug and firing sound at people, where Sting plays a ginger psycho lubed up with baby oil, and where Freddie Jones is forced at syringe-point to suckle milk from a cat – all whilst under the watchful eye of a gigantic spice-puffing space vagina.

I am of course talking about David Lynch's 1984 film, *Dune*, the adaptation for the big screen of Frank Herbert's epic sci-fi novel.

Dune is an intriguing and complex story about time and space, bravery and betrayal, and ultimately about one young man's destiny to unite a universe. Set in the year 10191, the story sees two great houses battling for control of the desolate sand planet

Arrakis. The planet's mysterious spice is harvested to fund war, giant tank-eating worms roam its surface and its indigenous Fremen warriors hold a great secret.

The *Dune* universe first came to PC in Cryo's modest 1992 adventure game, however it's undoubtedly Westwood Studios' 1993 masterpiece, *Dune II*, for which the universe is best remembered on PC. *Dune II: Battle for Arrakis*, or *Dune II: Building of a Dynasty* as it was known in North America, played a pivotal role in the formation of real time strategy as a genre, and laid solid foundations for the beloved *Command & Conquer* that came a year later.

Then, in 1998, and in the shadow of both *Command & Conquer* and *Red Alert*, Westwood and Intelligent Games released the now largely forgotten *Dune 2000*.

At the time it scored poorly, and rightly so in the context of how much the genre had developed by that point. It lacked the production values that we'd seen in *Red Alert* and had almost taken backward steps in harnessing the concept of unit balance. *Dune 2000* was simply *Dune II* in *Command & Conquer's* engine.

For that reason, I never played *Dune 2000* at release, and *Tiberian Sun* came out just 12 months later.

SANDS OF TIME

So why is *Dune 2000* worth playing today? Let's find out.

I recently watched the movie again, which got me thinking I'd love to delve back into *Dune's* strange universe and perhaps replay *Dune II*. Sadly, after viewing a couple of YouTube videos I was instantly put off. I'd forgotten how laborious the mechanics must have been – having to select each unit individually and

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
1998

DEVELOPER
Intelligent Games, Westwood

PUBLISHER
Virgin Interactive, EA

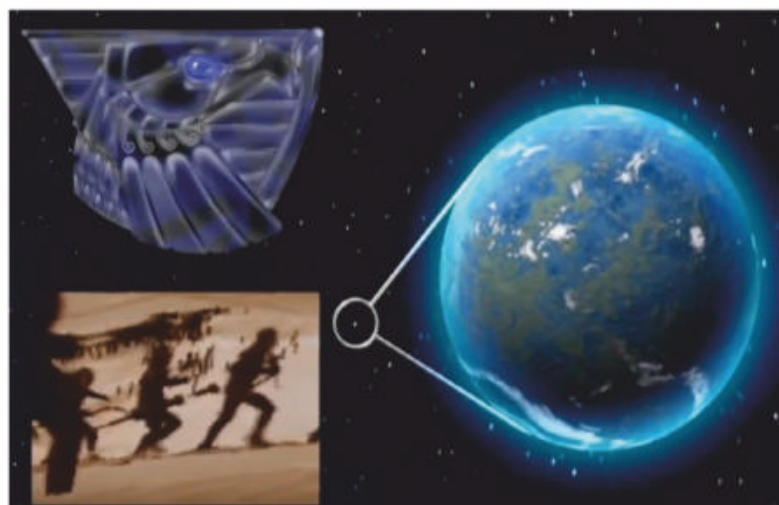
LINK
www.gruntmods.com



Expect some very '90s-looking animated sequences.



The worm has definitely turned.



manually select 'move' or 'attack'. How was it going to look on a 4K monitor? Would I be better off trying to play it on a calculator? Would I really get any satisfaction out of finishing a mission without a badly acted FMV sequence at the end? Could I even be arsed to try and get a 25-year-old game to work on a modern PC?

Dune 2000 was the solution. Back in 1998 *Dune 2000* was little more than a revamp of *Dune II*, but to be able to easily revisit that universe today that's exactly what I needed.

While *Dune 2000* isn't available through digital stores, you can download and play it for free courtesy of the legally murky *Dune 2000: Gruntmods Edition*. Gruntmods has done a fantastic job of making it easy to set up. It's available to play in just moments, and at about four times its original resolution.

CRAFT BEARD

The icing on the cake is it still includes all three sets of ludicrous full motion video sequences from each of the playable houses.

The game begins with an introduction to the story by Bene

ARRAKISS AND TELL

Three units that *Dune* did before *C&C*

DUNE II
1992



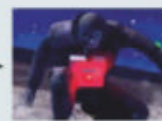
SABOTEUR
Unarmed and unplayable. Runs into buildings and blows them up.

C&C
1993



COMMANDO
Uses C4 to destroy buildings but is also armed with a deadly anti-infantry gun.

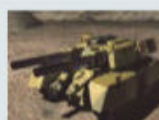
DUNE 2000
1998



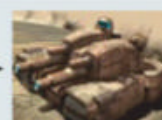
SABOTEUR
Blows up buildings but is now invisible. Basically an unarmed Tanya.



DEVASTATOR
The original Mammoth – but with a built in self-destruct.



MAMMOTH TANK
The twin-cannon behemoth with anti-infantry rockets.



DEVASTATOR
Identical to the *Dune II* version but fires plasma energy instead of shells.



THE DEATHHAND
A devastating warhead available with the Harkonnen palace.



NUCLEAR MISSILE
C&C's original villain superweapon was a *Dune* superweapon first.



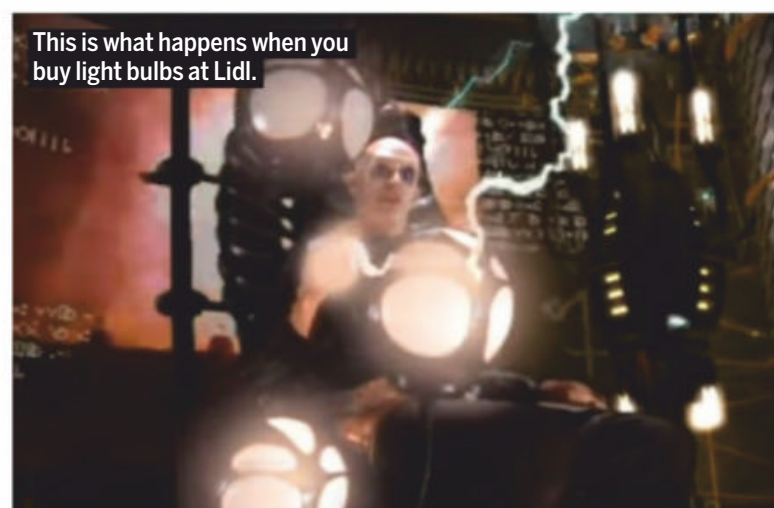
THE DEATHHAND
Similar to the *Dune II* Deathhand but more like a *Tiberian Sun* cluster missile.

Gesserit concubine Lady Elara – basically a bald witch with a detachable poisonous fingernail.

I'm drawn to play as house Atreides, not because they're noble heroes who liberate the oppressed natives, but because I want to see John Rhys-Davies' beard. Playing the role of mentat to house Atreides, he delivers a brilliant piece of oratory during one of the early FMV sequences, proclaiming that "Harkonnen would rather drink your blood than their own mother's milk". It's classic *Command & Conquer* movie territory, complete with a tiny set, about three extras and a terrible green screened desert backdrop.

As the game begins the first thing I notice is that the unit animations aren't quite as polished as *C&C*, and there are fewer frames when the units move. It's playable though. My screen resolution for the first mission is so high that I find the corners of the map with a couple of infantry then realise the mission area is basically just a box in the middle of the screen.

I notice early on that many of the vehicles such as harvesters and trikes take a form much more akin to the



🔴 movie than in *Dune II*, and that's also true in the FMV sequences. In terms of mechanics, it's pretty much identical to the original *Command & Conquer*. You can select and move multiple groups of vehicles and assign numerical shortcuts to groups. Sadly there's no way to queue unit production as in *Tiberian Sun*, but once the tech tree lets you build a Starport you can receive dozens of units at a time, making this real tank-rush territory. Unlike anything in early *Command & Conquer*, the Starport works almost like a marketplace, where stock runs dry and where prices fluctuate.

Much like *Dune II*, there's a third house called Ordos, derived from the book's Spacing Guild, in addition to the Atreides and Harkonnen. *Dune 2000* also introduces smugglers and mercenaries, some of which you're allied with and who will abandon you mid-mission if they become overrun. The native Fremen warriors make a return too, living in caves amongst the rocky outcrops and ambushing enemies out of the blue. Finally of course is the Emperor and his ruthless Sardukar warriors. They're really just the same as your chaps but

dressed in purple beekeeper outfits for added drama.

Much like *Dune II* and even *Command & Conquer*, around the fourth mission you'll find your base strewn with your own badly damaged light vehicles – simply because it's the last mission before you're allowed to build a repair bay. All you can do is build more.

Playing through the game on

MEET THE MENTATS

Three of Dune's cognitive geniuses



NOREE MONEO
HOUSE ATREIDES

It's a joy to watch John Rhys-Davies play this red-blooded military role. He comes complete with trademark beard and rolling 'Rs'.



HAYT DE VRIES
HOUSE HARKONNEN

True to the book, Hayt De Vries brandishes eyebrows that would make David Bellamy blush, and has the red 'I just ate an ice lolly' lips.



EDRIC O
HOUSE ORDOS

Complete with bizarre voice synthesiser, Edric of House Ordos gives a robotic performance, with a syringe hovering menacingly over his neck throughout.

'hard' actually gets quite tough by the fourth or fifth mission. You're often fighting against more than one house, plus mercenaries or Fremen. Enemy AI unforgivably fling wave upon wave of mixed unit attacks meaning that you need a good range of anti-infantry and anti-tank defence.

TANKS ALOT

Each house has one specialist unit that becomes available in the later missions and each unit either reflects its house or the original story. There's a definite 'holy shit' moment the first time I see the brutal Harkonnen's Devastator tank rumbling towards my base. It's like C&C's Mammoth tank only bigger, and takes a battering before it's finally destroyed.

House Ordos are the underhand sneaks, and their Deviator tank is based on illegal Ixian technology. It fires shells filled with mind-altering gas that temporarily changes any affected unit's allegiance, much like Yuri's nonsense in *Red Alert 2*.

Playing as house Atreides means I can build their unique unit now too – the Sonic Tank. In the spirit of the book, the Sonic Tank projects sound at enemy units with



The high resolution is a bit of a treat.

THE LACK OF ANTI-INFANTRY TURRETS IS A HUGE EXPLOIT WHEN ATTACKING

devastating effect. In a later mission I suffer a complete Sonic Tank fail whilst playing as house Atreides. Remembering what I've learnt up until this point, I make sure I've got a good variety of vehicles to counter-act whatever the enemy AI might pull out of the bag. They include half a dozen Sonic Tanks.

As my units move into position I realise that the Sonic Tanks must have been the inspiration for *Tiberian Sun*'s Disrupter Tanks as they're both heavily armoured and channel powerful energy at their targets.

It's with some regret then that I realise too late they share exactly the same flaw. Within moments my Sonic Tanks are firing waves of sound at the attacking Ordos, and any of my other vehicles between them are having concentrated sound waves fired up their asses. Friendly fire and foul language ensue, and I'm forced to pull back for repairs.



Some of *Dune 2000*'s maps are gigantic, and the last missions in particular can take hours to complete. There's plenty of gaming time to be had here, with nine missions to complete as each of the three houses. Though there's a lack of diversity in the arsenal, expect some of the biggest open-field tank battles of any of the early *Command & Conquer* games, including *Red Alert*.

WORM HOLES

Sadly the game has one quite specific issue – it's missing any form of stationary anti-infantry turret. It does however encourage you to be pro-active in how you defend rather than just building turrets and leaving them to do the business. One of the best ways is to just charge over and squash enemy infantry with tanks, and then counter-attack any remaining units from behind. It isn't a strategy the AI pick up on for their own defence of course, so the lack of anti-infantry turrets is a huge exploit when attacking.

As part of C&C's legacy, *Dune 2000* massively benefits from having cliff formations and bridges on its maps which really help make each

mission more interesting. Random enemy carryall drops in obscure corners of the map, Ornithopter bombing raids, and of course the tank-eating sandworms all keep you on your toes. However, don't expect any missions to kick off with 20 minutes guiding a tobacco-spitting commando around destroying SAM sites – they're all pretty much 'build a base then level everything else'.

Dune 2000's biggest shortfall in 1998 is still prevalent today, and it's the lack of a diverse unit balance system. Other than one specialist vehicle per house, all three sets of units are almost identical. You can still capture enemy technology and use the enemies' own vehicles against them, but at its heart *Dune 2000* is about something much simpler.

At its core *Dune 2000* is a bread and butter RTS – for me that means building a base, harvesting resources, clearing off the fog of war, a bit of cunning tank management and the obliteration of everything in sight.

If *Dune II* was before your time and you've always wondered what all the fuss was about, or if you're just a fan of the movie and its universe, *Dune 2000* is well worth a gander. ■



WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL



SCANNING PLANETS IN MASS EFFECT 2

Imagining whole ecosystems from very little. *By Malindy Hetfeld*



RIGHT: Can't wait for when humans are discovering colourful planets to name Planet McPlanetface.



Most people scoff a bit when I tell them that one of my favourite things about *Mass Effect 2* is scanning planets. I get it – the whole act of clicking on a planet, watching a transition screen, turning said planet around its axis for a while until you’ve found a mineral deposit and then listening to the same lines over and over again as your probe launches isn’t exactly a rousing experience. It doesn’t have to be.

The *Mass Effect* universe is an accomplished piece of world building. The moment I step into Shephard’s boots, I have a personal history that ties me to the achievements of the human race in outer space. Humans made first contact with new species, became represented in an interplanetary council and can basically go wherever they please. But the *Mass Effect* saga is also about uncharted space, showing us that for all that humans have seen and built, there’s always more of space to be discovered.

To me, scanning planets is about discovery, in the most scientific sense of the word. It is, like Spock’s technobabble in *Star Trek*, an important part in delivering a fully realised world. Of course there is no practical use to me as the player in knowing the radius and day length of some random planet, but without them, it wouldn’t be a planet.

ALL SHAPES AND SIZES

The codex entries for planets consist of two different sets of data: a set of numbers describing the planet by parameters such as atmospheric pressure and surface gravity, and a description of whatever has been discovered during previous expeditions, such as the soil quality

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
January 26, 2010

EXPECT TO PAY
£18

OUR REVIEW
90%

LINK
masseffect.bioware.com

FILLING THE GAPS *More games that leave things up to the imagination*



CULTIST SIMULATOR

Summon demons and build a cult with just a deck of cards – all your evil deeds are yours to imagine.



KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

You gradually come to accept that Kentucky at night is full of ghosts, but you rarely meet them.



STORIES UNTOLD

The horror in *Stories Untold*, a mostly text-based adventure, comes precisely from the things it hints at.



WHERE THE WATER TASTES LIKE WINE

You meet many different people and collect their stories while moving across the continent.

or any life forms present. It’s the kind of background info doomed to go unread but stuffed with detail all the same, which makes me love it more. Imagine the effort and dedication that goes into making whole solar systems worth of planets with different conditions – an immense world building endeavour – all just for you to scan a planet and siphon off a few stones.

From a mechanical perspective, scanning is a more economic and far less tedious alternative to going down to a planet in your Mako and driving around until you find minerals (hate!), the way you do in the original *Mass Effect*. It’s supposed to be a quicker and more efficient form of resource gathering, grounded in the realities of spaceflight.

I’d go as far as to say scanning could be intentionally boring, because not every job on a spaceship involves going pew, pew, pew. But imagine a crew hanging tiredly over their consoles logging the data of one more planet scan, suddenly faced with a major discovery.

Take the planet 2175 Aeia, a name that sounds like a keyboard smash. After a cursory flyby, nothing noteworthy was recorded, until you go back and scan the planet again, only to discover that its atmospheric composition is very close to that of Earth. Have you just discovered a new habitat for humans? What kind of species already call this planet their home? Those are the kind of questions I can’t get enough of.

INFINITY AND BEYOND

Some planets, like Parnassus, are simply not in the Citadel database due to bureaucratic snafu, which makes me think about how even space conquest is nothing without a good backend filing system. *Mass Effect 3* and *Mass Effect Andromeda* even go a step further and tell more detailed stories of how the planets fit into the world, detailing noteworthy history of who lives there or what happened to render a planet inhabitable. Whenever I find a rusty spaceship or satellite, I imagine the

SPACE CONQUEST IS NOTHING WITHOUT A GOOD BACKEND FILING SYSTEM

mighty storms that might have ripped them apart, whole stories that played out before I uncover the debris.

Scanning planets in *Mass Effect 2* shows that even at a time when devs have the storage capacity and graphical capabilities to let players run wild and explore even the most detailed world, what really inspires the imagination is to sometimes not be able to look at something – the same way the vague shadows in the original *Silent Hill* were way scarier to me than the bright, crystal-clear HD version. I dream of the stars and the life undiscovered, but I imagine there will be a lot of scanning before we meet our first alien, too. ■



RIGHT: Travelling from planet to planet collecting minerals is admittedly tedious.



ANDY KELLY



"If videogames be the food of love," wrote famous gamer William 'n0Sc0pe' Shakespeare. "Play on." I will, Shakespeare. I will.

SOLVE A CRIME



SHERLOCK HOLMES: CRIMES AND PUNISHMENTS

frogwares.com

→ Become legendary sleuth Sherlock Holmes and investigate an anthology of intriguing mysteries. This is one of the best detective games on PC because it's entirely possible to draw the wrong conclusions from the evidence and accuse an innocent person.

EXPLORE SPACE

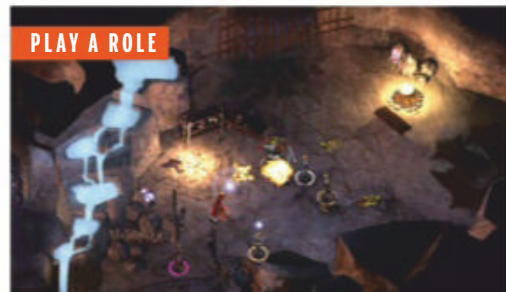


ELITE DANGEROUS

elitedangerous.com

→ Finding your way in *Elite's* enormous replica of the Milky Way can be intimidating at first, but it's great when you discover your niche – whether it's trading, bounty hunting, or exploring the cosmos. And with a flight stick and thruster, the tactile, nuanced handling of the ships is taken to the next level.

PLAY A ROLE



BALDUR'S GATE: ENHANCED EDITION

baldursgate.com

→ With the exciting news that Larian, creator of the *Divinity* series, is making a third *Baldur's Gate*, now's the perfect time to revisit the original. And with its varied, unpredictable quests, massive, detailed world, and charming characters, it still absolutely holds up.

GET NOSTALGIC



HYPNOSPACE OUTLAW

hypnospace.net

→ Set entirely within a wonderful parody of the internet of the past, this adventure is one of the most original games on PC. Working as an enforcer for a tech company, you've been hired to scour the web for illegal content and censor it, navigating gaudy gifs, MIDI music, and other lo-fi standards of the GeoCities era.

MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Andy Kelly

REVEAL THE TRUTH



EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE

thechineseroom.co.uk

→ This haunting end of the world story is fairly hands-off, with only very limited interaction, but it makes up for it by being powerfully atmospheric. Exploring the English countryside, you realise everyone has disappeared, leaving behind ghostly visions of the past.

ESCAPE A PLANET



THE DIG

gog.com/game/the_dig

→ A space mission goes awry, stranding a small group of astronauts on a bizarre alien world. This is far from LucasArts' best point-and-click adventure, but it's one of its most interesting. The dialogue is great, the weird, colourful planet is a delight to explore, and the puzzles are fairly challenging – albeit a tad obscure.

FEEL THE BEAT



HOTLINE MIAMI

devolverdigital.com

→ With its pounding soundtrack and stylish ultraviolence, *Hotline Miami* is the best kind of sensory overload. Every neon-drenched level is a bloody top-down puzzle box you violently solve with reflexes, intense concentration, and lots of weapons. Just avoid the sequel, which increased the scale dramatically.

UPHOLD THE LAW



SWAT 4

irrationalgames.com

→ Before conquering the world with *BioShock*, Irrational made this brilliant SWAT simulator. It sees you dealing with a number of dangerous crimes, from a gas station robbery to a hostage situation in an office. And dealing with them effectively requires patience, planning, and playing it by the book.

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Magazine approaches deadline...



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